still waters

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by Vulpecula_et_Anser

Summary

Sakura is twelve when she queues up in front a desk with a bunch of other equally-terrified looking shinobi. The ages range from younger than her to old enough to be her grandpa.

The man sitting at the desk is stony-faced as he doles out assignments. Sakura obediently shuffles forward when it is her turn, and recites her shinobi identification number in a shaky voice when asked.

When the provost marshal looks at her, looks down at his paper, looks back at her, and grimaces, Sakura knows it’s not going to be good.

or

How Sakura survives the war, told in bits and pieces.

Notes

HELLO and welcome to this fucking behemoth oneshot monstrosity. I've been working on this off and on for about a year and it is finally finished. I wanted to work on something that had a very different vibe to RRD, something less plot-driven and more introspective. It was also interesting to write something with a much more grim tone, and I found in cathartic in recent months, as I've had some tough things going on.

I will add specific content warnings at the end author's note because I don't wan't to spoil those who don't want to be spoiled, but the shit in his fic gets very, very dark. You have been warned!

Please enjoy :)

See the end of the work for more notes

Sakura is twelve years old and two weeks shy of graduating from the Academy when the war with Iwa breaks out.

Had she graduated, Sakura would have been put on a team with Uchiha Sasuke and Namikaze Naruto, the sons of the head of police and the famed Yellow Flash, respectively. They would have vouched for her. She would have been protected, and not sent out to die.

Unfortunately for her, that does not happen. Sakura is twelve when they hand her her hitai-ate even though the graduation exam is supposed to be in two weeks. Sakura is twelve when she receives a scroll and a set of fatigues that are far too big for her.

Sakura is twelve when she tries to read the scroll, sees words like *conscription* and *necessary* and tries to make sense of them.

You will report to the rendezvous point in forty-eight hours or be deemed a deserter, and be subject to the punishment prescribed therefor in the Konoha Articles of War.

Sakura is twelve as she watches her mother sob as she hems the sleeves and pant-legs into something more manageable.

“I’ll be okay, mama,” she soothes, feeling too old and too young. The hokage is a nice man, he wouldn't send someone like her—a child—to do anything too dangerous. Konoha is a good hidden village, Sakura knows this because she studied very hard in her history class and always got full marks.

Sakura is twelve when she queues up in front a desk with a bunch of other equally-terrified looking shinobi. The ages range from younger than her to old enough to be her grandpa.

The man sitting at the desk is stony-faced as he doles out assignments. Sakura obediently shuffles forward when it is her turn, and recites her shinobi identification number in a shaky voice when asked.

When the provost marshal looks at her, looks down at his paper, looks back at her, and grimaces, Sakura knows it’s not going to be good.

“Haruno Sakura, you will report to Squad 5C, Combat and Field Assistance division. Please proceed to the next desk to receive your field kit. The village thanks you for your service.”

Sakura is twelve when they ship her straight to the frontlines.

Dear Mama and Papa,

I finally made it to [REDACTED] It’s pretty [REDACTED] because it’s [REDACTED]

I think I’m starting to adjust. Yesterday I [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] [REDACTED]

My squad leader is [REDACTED] which is kind of weird. I miss the Academy.

And I miss you and papa, so much. I hope he's been remembering to take his high blood pressure medication.

I love you.

Your daughter,

Sakura

The Combat and Field Assistance division, or CFA, has several monikers that Sakura realizes very quickly are decidedly more accurate.

The Cannon Fodder Army. The Meatshield Brigade. The School (of Fresh Fish).

If it were up to Sakura, she'd choose the first, if only because the acronyms are the same. She likes consistency. As it is, the last seems to be the most popular, and every morning she gets woken up by an obnoxious chuunin yelling *"wake up fishies, it's time for class!"*

Functionally, the School is a whatever-needs-done squad. A team of gophers whose only job is to live long enough to keep the war machine rumbling along.

Five squads of eight to ten genin (Fish) make up the entire division. They don't even have any officers, just a sergeant for each squad who delivers them their orders for the day. The School also doesn't have a designated outpost or squad formation, and members are regularly split up and shifted to the station that requires their help the most. As it is, no one has friends in the School, and they're generally regarded by other divisions to be ignored and kept at arm's length, because chances are they'll be gone or dead in a week. The School does not have a medic.

A lot of Sakura's days are spent digging trenches, setting shitty traps, or burning bodies. She scrubs latrines and disposes of medical waste. She is also occasionally sent out into cold battlefields to loot corpses, which was an adjustment. The first time she had to dig through the pockets of a dead Iwa-nin, whose throat had been so thoroughly slashed she could see his spine, Sakura vomited. Sergeant Mizuki (who she used to call Mizuki-sensei, in days of yore) had looked at her in disgust and denied Sakura her dinner rations that night.

"Toughen up or die," he sneered. And she does.

Sakura also starts wearing her hitai-ate around her neck.

The School is not a frontline combat division, either. In fact, it is a high likelihood of failure in live combat that predestines members of the School to be enlisted in it. Fish are on the field before and after the fight but rarely during. Sakura does not step foot on an active battlefield unless it is accidentally. It is this strange limbo of somehow being in both more

and less danger than other soldiers that earns the School their chilly reception from the other divisions.

When Sergeant Mizuki finds out she has decent chakra control, Sakura gets slated to assist with detecting enemy traps and mines. She's been at the border three months now and has learned personally just how much the Iwa-nin love their explosives.

He "teaches" her how to enhance her sense of smell with chakra (three minutes of instruction and one demonstration) and then sends her out. This, she knows, is the School's true purpose. Just be a body. *Just keep swimming.*

When Sakura was nine, she developed a skill she likes to call the *Just Get it Done* switch. Her papa had gotten terribly sick–aspiration pneumonia that became septic–and her mama fell apart. And Sakura, unable to do anything else just–turned off the parts of her brain that panicked. She visualized packing them into a neat little box, sealing the box, and burying it. She held her mama when she cried. She bought groceries with mama's money and cooked the best she could. She just…got through it, and refused to focus on anything other than getting through today, so she could get through tomorrow.

The key is to never, ever unbury the box.

Sakura flipped that switch the day she arrived on the frontlines, and has been relying on it ever since.

It helps that one of Sakura's talents is single-minded determination. When she commits to something, she is completely and utterly devoted. Right up until the war, Sakura had only two goals–have the highest grades, and win Uchiha Sasuke's attention. The former she excelled at, the latter, well…she certainly tried her best.

Now, Sakura's only focus is to be the best bomb-sniffer she can be. She wakes, braids her waist-length hair (the last bastion of her former life, and one she will only give up when she dies), eats a meager breakfast ration and gets to work. She has no Sasuke to be devoted to anymore, so she is devoted to the task at hand.

After surviving three days on the job (and watching two other Fish be blown into gory chunks), a chuunin whose name she never learns teaches her how to stretch her chakra into thin net, to sense explosive seals as well as smell them. Sakura's control is so good that she can not only form a net, but twist it into long, sensory tendrils. Chakra antennae. She figures out how to focus chakra into her hands and feet, amplifying the vibrations in the ground and translating them into data. She gets odd looks, when she goes out into the field without shoes, but she ignores them.

Every smell, every sound, every shadow is data. Information. *Knowledge. That* is Sakura's currency. And she hoards her wealth.

One would think that such talent and aptitude would earn her attention, or perhaps a promotion to a division where her primary purpose extends beyond *die so someone more important does not.* It should. But it doesn't, because this is war-time and the School is the list that never gets revisited. Once deemed expendable is to be damned.

Sakura always eats alone, but the times that she is physically close enough to overhear a conversation, she listens. Data, data, data. Sometimes the low voices become grumblings about the hokage, for perpetuating this war and for signing off on the creation of a division like the CFA. A fairly significant fraction of Sakura agrees, but she shoves that down violently whenever it bubbles up. For one, it is sedition. Sakura has not survived this long to be court-martialed and executed for something as trivial as *gossip.*

Second, it comes dangerously close to unburying the box, and that is not an option.

Eventually, a brown-haired and dull-eyed chuunin named Kobayashi shows her how to actually disable the exploding and trap seals too. It's shockingly simple, at least to Sakura.

Seals are, essentially, chakra stored in the form of a series or arrangement of symbols. Activation of a seal is like a chemical process; chakra travels through the seal in the direction it is written to go, and once every stroke is live, the reaction is catalyzed and it goes off. Disrupting a paper seal can be as simple as ripping it; if the part of the equation is destroyed, the reaction will not complete. Some seals are more complicated and have multiple activation routes in order to protect them from the simpler methods of disabling. For those seals, they must be completely physically destroyed.

Another solution is to push chakra through the seal in the reverse direction to the activation, which fully resets it and makes the seal usable again. This is significantly trickier, because the disabler must sense the direction and input chakra as they go. If chakra is inputted in the wrong order, or incompletely–well, one can probably imagine the outcome.

Because Sakura can sense the direction and how much chakra is required to disable a seal, *and* has the control to dispense exactly that amount, she's soon able to crank her way through dozens of seals a day, even with her small reserves (that are always running low, because food and sleep are always in short supply). Every day she returns to camp with wads of Iwa exploding tags, ready to be repurposed for their troops.

As a result, Sakura becomes a somewhat desirable asset to the Trapping and Defense squad. People request her to help clear areas. They stop calling her *guppie* or *pinky* and start calling her Haruno. She begins to spend less time saying nothing to her fellow Fish, and actually having short, if somewhat amiable, interactions with members of T&D.

It's a shame it doesn't last long.

Dear Mama and Papa,

I hope you are both well. And the village. I imagine it must be a little strange with [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

Is Ino well? I haven't heard if [REDACTED] and I miss her, too.

I am working hard. It isn't easy, but I am trying my best. The weather is [REDACTED] out here in the [REDACTED]

I love you. Stay safe.

Sakura

It's cold and wet, and Sakura's hair and fatigues are plastered to her body like a second skin.

Battle is on the horizon.

Konoha is making a foray into Kusa, hoping to recapture eastern farmlands from Iwa and Ame. Kusa lands—nothing but open fields—are the antithesis of *comfortable* for the typically forest-dwelling Konoha nin, but gaining access to their bounty is critical. Sakura knows from the Academy that Kusa is not a formal Konoha ally (yet) but their annexation by Ame is desired even less by the locals.

Sakura doubts Kusa will be thrilled to host Konoha nin, and only hopes that the hokage is being truthful when he says Fire is not interested in absorbing the smaller country, and only wants to prevent the expansion of Ame (and by extension Iwa, whose tenuous alliance with Ame is sure to crumble when the larger country decides they want Ame's sapphire mines and Kusa's farmland). Fire's partial annexation of Rice during the last war is probably not working in their favor in terms of establishing trust.

But now is not the time to worry about that. Now is the time to work.

Sakura can tell without extending even a single chakra antenna that enemy nin have been hard at work trapping the basin that the Konoha troops will be traveling through come morning light. It's not the ideal path, but it's that or the mountain pass—and nothing is stupider than trying to engage Iwa shinobi on giant fucking rock.

"How do we know they're just not just gonna jump us while we're out here?" her partner (for lack of better word) asks, chewing on a thumbnail that's already been bitten down to a bloody stub. He's a new CFA recruit, having been reassigned from a combat squad, which does not instill even the tiniest shred of confidence in Sakura in his abilities. She does not know his name, and isn't interested in learning it.

"We don't," she says, peeling off her sandals. That's why they're assigned cover, and why scouting teams are sent to engage ambush squads ahead of time. Sakura's jaw ticks in annoyance, was this kid listening at all during the briefing?

The guppie just continues shifting foot to foot and gnawing on his fingers.

Sakura tries to ignore him, summoning her chakra into the soles of her feet. The ground transmits its usual hum, full of secrets (if one is willing to parse them out) but the boy's squirming is creating a lot of interference.

"Quit fucking fidgeting," she bites out. Oh, how her mama would despair at the potty mouth she's gained over the last half-year.

He stills, and Sakura drops down to her hands and knees to better hear the rumblings of the earth.

Some days later, Sakura sips tasteless soup out of a tin mug as a fire crackles in front of her. On her left sits Ozawa-san, a middle-aged seals specialist, and on her right sits Miyoshi-san, a trapping professional who plays cat's cradle with razor-sharp wire and somehow doesn't get sliced.

"It's a real shame they've got you stuck in CFA," Ozawa-san grumbles as he scratches his somewhat-prominent belly. "We could make good use outta you in Sabotage."

Sakura doesn't know how to respond to that. It's the most complimentary thing anyone has said to her since the war started six months ago.

Something vaguely shaped like hope gasps to life in her chest. "Could they…transfer me?" she asks hesitantly. Really, couldn't they? Soldiers were reassigned all of the time. Fish or not, why would she be any different?

But Ozawa-san is shaking his head, and it dies again. "Already asked. Your sarge said you're the best trench-digger he's got and there'd be riots if you weren't around."

Sakura blinks. That doesn't make any sense, and the tone of his voice indicates he doesn't believe it, either. Sakura hasn't been digging trenches for weeks and she's dogshit at it anyway. More likely than that, Sergeant Mizuki is probably not keen on letting go of someone who makes his squad look good. Higher success rates means better supplies and maybe even some recognition, at least for her sergeant. Sensing her skepticism, Ozawa-san shrugs.

"Wish it were different, but unless someone higher up orders the transfer, his word sticks," Ozawa-san says as he sucks down a mouthful of soup. "I suppose a T&D sarge could request it, but if Mizuki says no, that's that."

Sakura shrugs. It's not like she had any real hope, anyway. Even if Sergeant Mizuki isn't willing to let her out of the School, if she remains useful, he'll probably continue to have her assist T&D. That's enough for her.

Later that night, Sakura hums a nameless tune to herself as she patches the numerous rips and holes in her fatigues. In some sort of fit of generosity, Miyoshi-san had tossed a small sewing kit at Sakura after dinner.

"Give it back to me when you're finished," were his gruff instructions. "Your uniform is fucking depressing."

And, well. Sakura wasn't going to argue with that.

When she finally retires to her cot, fingers stinging from too many needle pricks, Sakura wonders if maybe, just maybe, things will start to get a little easier for her. Sleep comes somewhat easy that night.

The next evening, when Sakura brings Ozawa-san thirteen exploding seals, two poison-gas seals and an electrocution seal, reset and neatly stacked, he regards her with a strange look in his eye.

Then he says, “Sit down. You’re good enough at shutting those fuckers off—let’s see how you are at making them.”

And thus begins Sakura’s rudimentary lessons in sealing.

Ozawa-san (he guffawed for three straight minutes when she tried to call him Ozawa-sensei) doesn’t have much time to teach nor she to learn, but Sakura is nothing but a quick study. She memorizes the characters needed to light a fuse, to seal a body, to summon a weapon. Sealing, Sakura is delighted to learn, is basically math with chakra. And Sakura always loved math.

After a week of assisting in sealing, Sakura is offered a cot in the somewhat-nicer T&D tents. When she asks Sergeant Mizuki, he just scowls and shrugs. “Sleep where you want,” he grumbles. “But you still answer to me, at the end of the day.”

“Yes, sir.”

When the first mutterings begin, Sakura doesn’t pay them any attention. Hearsay is the primary tender of war (or at least this outpost) and most of the time, the rumor mill is just that. However, when the whispers don’t stop, Sakura feels an entirely new pit of dread form in her belly.

For the first time since the war began, Konoha is losing ground.

The ripples of this fact start small, but just like a wave, they grow. The tension lines in the faces of her comrades grow deeper and ever more grave. Their ranks thin as more and more battles are fought (and with alarming frequency, lost) but somehow supplies dwindle even faster.

Sakura wonders absently just how much her growth will be stunted by her beyond-lackluster diet.

Daylight wanes as winter nears, and Iwa destroys one of Konoha’s largest ironworks, throttling weapons sourcing to the front. Admittedly, this does not personally impact Sakura very much—she still has every shuriken and kunai that was provided in her original field kit eight months ago. She’s always kept a close eye on her meager belongings, but now even more so.

Sakura knows that reassignments are coming down the bend, and there’s even been whispers of breaking up the School to be dispersed into live combat teams. This speculation is met, of course, with derision and fear from all sides. As far as anyone else is concerned, Fish are nothing but hindrances in the battlefield. Fodder without even the cannon.

Honestly, Sakura believes this to be a fair assumption; her taijutsu scores were mediocre during the academy, and she's done absolutely zero training since the start of the war. Sensing and sealing can only get one so far when a big man with a big knife is bearing down, she figures.

Sakura is sitting alone in the tent she shares with four T&D members, sharpening said shuriken and kunai, when Sergeant Mizuki leans in through the flap.

"Haruno," he mutters, face unreadable. "Come with me, there's something we need to discuss."

Sakura nods, already tucking her supplies away. Nerves churn in her belly. "Yes, sir."

He does not wait for her and disappears again. When Sakura steps outside, he is nowhere to be found, so she can only assume he's gone back to his tent. Carefully, Sakura weaves her way through the mud and olive-drab structures. An unidentifiable smell is wafting from the mess tent, which means "dinner" will be ready soon.

As she sloshes through the mud, Sakura wonders if she's finally about to receive a formal reassignment to Trapping and Defense. Sage knows that her association with the CFA has been essentially in name only for a couple months now.

When she reaches her sergeant's tent, he politely holds the flap open for her. Sakura enters, keeping an eye on him. It's the most courteous thing he's ever done and it's wildly out of character. Sergeant Mizuki follows her inside.

And then he places silencing seals on the tent poles framing the entrance. Ones that she made. The noise of the outside world fades into an opaque hum.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Sakura waits wordlessly, alarm bells clanging in her head as her stomach drops past her knees. Clammy fists clench around the hem of her still-too-big fatigues and Sakura fights the urge to bolt.

Finally, Sergeant Mizuki speaks. "As you know, it's been pretty stressful lately for us higher-ranks," he says, voice a slither in Sakura's ear. "Given everything that's been going on."

Sakura nods jerkily, because it looks like he's waiting for a response.

He mirrors the nod. "You're so level-headed and mature, Sakura," Mizuki continues. It's the first time he's ever said her first name, and Sakura feels sick.

"I was thinking you could help me with some stress relief." His gaze flickers to the cot next to her. "Naturally, I would be willing to negotiate some things in return for your help."

Sakura glances at the silencing seals, and without thinking too long about it, reaches out a hand to tap the tent pole closest to her.

For the record, Sakura has never had the chance to test her nature affinity with chakra paper. Such an item is a luxury and totally unnecessary anywhere near the frontlines. However, Sakura *has* spent countless hours writing trapping seals of various persuasions, and

discovered that some come easier than others. Sakura's explosive seals are so-so, but according to Ozawa-san, her earthquake and electrocution tags are exemplary.

And, well. The tent poles are metal, and metal is extremely conductive.

The silencing seals spark and sizzle from her chakra before burning to ash. The din outside resumes.

Mizuki's face is carefully blank. Then, he steps aside.

Sakura's feet are moving before she even fully registers it. Before she can escape, however, a hand catches her upper arm, squeezing like a vice.

"Did you know that Ozawa-san's daughter is widowed?"

Sakura blinks at the non-sequitur, heart pounding in her ears. She did not know that, nor does she want to now.

Mizuki's gaze is cold and hard. "It would be a real shame if she lost her father too, don't you think?"

He releases her arm, and Sakura leaves the tent.

"Hey, Matsuo, I've got a volunteer for that mission we were discussing this morning."

The low chatter in the officer's tent abruptly stops, and suddenly Sakura is being scrutinized by several sets of skeptical eyes. She chances a brief glance up and then immediately returns to staring at her feet. It's as austere in its appointments as any other—very little furniture, and what does have a flat surface is absolutely covered in scrolls and paper—but there are silencing seals everywhere, along with other illusory seals that Sakura doesn't recognize.

Sakura stands next to Mizuki in silence with her head bowed. She's never been in one of the strategy tents before, and feels deeply out of place among all of the older, more experienced shinobi. She must look ridiculous in her ill-fitting fatigues and pink hair.

"You sure?" asks a red-haired man who Sakura assumes must be Matsuo. "What recommends her for it?"

Next to her, Mizuki shrugs. "She's small and weak, she'll fit right in with the civilians. And she's been working with Ozawa on seals so she'll be able to set it up properly."

Sakura's mind is racing. Civilians? Setting *what* up?

"That's the brat that's been working with Ozawa?" someone else pipes up, a woman this time. She has triangular tattoos on her cheeks and the T&D insignia on her flak vest.

"He says she's getting pretty decent," the woman continues, crossing her arms. "Seems a waste to send her on a mission like this."

Oh. It all makes sense now.

Sakura does not flinch when Mizuki claps a hand onto her shoulder, but just barely. She continues to not flinch when he squeezes so hard her bones creak in protest.

“Haruno here has decided that she’s not doing enough to serve her village, and insisted on it,” he says easily, shaking her a bit. “Isn’t that right, Haruno?”

Sakura manages the barest of nods.

Matsuo regards her with an uncertain twist to his mouth. “It probably *is* a good idea to send someone who can tell their ass from their elbow with seals,” he admits. Then he asks, “How old are you, kid?”

“Twelve, sir.”

“Fuck.” He scrubs a hand over his face. *“Fuck.”*

Dear Mama and Papa,

I have a new job. I hope I do well at it.

I love you both.

Sakura

They dye her hair.

It makes sense—Sakura’s hair is terribly conspicuous even when she’s *not* trying to commit espionage. For a mission like this, she must appear as unremarkable as possible. She soothes herself with the knowledge that the mousy brown is only semi-permanent, and should wash out in a few weeks.

Assuming, of course, she’s still alive.

Sakura shifts the meager pack thrown over her shoulder. She’s dressed in rags and they took all of her weapons, and despite not having used them much over the last half-year, she feels terribly naked. She’s not even permitted to hide a single flat razor in her chest-wrap. Lieutenant Matsuo’s words echo in her head.

“We will escort you up to a few clicks short of the corridor. Then you will begin heading west. Try to ingratiate yourself with a family, you will stand out far less that way.”

The evacuation corridor for civilians stretches across one of the wider parts of southwestern Kusa, situated between the farmlands and hidden village. Konoha failed in recapturing those lands the month prior, and so Iwa controls everything up until the corridor, which currently serves as something of a buffer. Kusagakure, Sakura has been informed, is preparing for a

last stand some time in the next couple of weeks, in hopes of driving Iwa back to Ame. Konoha is supposed to support this push, in…a few different ways.

Traffic in the corridor (effectively a wide mud road paved by way of heavy foot traffic) is going both directions, which is amusing to Sakura in some abstract way. Kusa civilians (and those otherwise unfortunate to be caught in Kusa right now) can choose which village they think will ultimately be successful—Iwa or Konoha.

Very occasionally she will see the flak vest of a Konoha, Kusa, or Iwa nin, but they stay on their designated side of the road—Konoha and Kusa to the north, Iwa to the south—and do not, under any circumstances, cross it. It is these strange moments of etiquette, equally observed by either side, that Sakura finds most perplexing about war. If this were two clicks west those shinobi would be ripping each other apart. Here, they merely regard each other warily from across the way. Apprehensive neighbors instead of mortal enemies.

For now, Sakura is keeping her head down, her hood up, and just focusing on putting one foot in front of the other. The mud squelches under her ratty wooden sandals, and all around her is the half-panicked, half-exhausted din of mass exodus.

She will travel along the corridor until it hits the Kusa river, which starts in far eastern Kusa and runs south until just beyond Kusagakure, where it veers west. The intersection is roughly in the middle of the corridor, and functions as a checkpoint for evacuating civilians, and as a spot to rest and wash up before they head either northwest or southeast to their refuge of choice.

Sakura does not try to sidle up to any families–there are plenty of kids her age traveling solo, and from what she can tell, the Kusa people are very solitary and reserved. If this were Konoha, it probably would seem odd to be alone, but not here.

It doesn't take long to reach the river, and Sakura realizes with a twist in her belly just how fucking small Kusa really is. She just walked very literally halfway across the country in less than a full day. She hopes that Kusagakure has enough troops to make the last stand more than a slaughtering.

The riverbank is muddy and the water is cloudy, thanks to the near-constant disturbance of civilians going in and out. Regardless, Sakura picks her way down to the water's edge, peels off her sodden sandals and steps into the river. The water is bitingly cold, enough so that her toes immediately begin to throb, but Sakura doesn't leave. She hasn't had access to anything bigger than a bucket in months, and will appreciate this while she can.

She fills her flask and splashes water on her face. It's gritty from the disturbed silt, and yet she emerges cleaner anyway.

It is strangely peaceful, here on the edge of the slowly winding river. Well, it *looks* peaceful, anyhow. The river is wide enough that Sakura could throw a rock with all of her meager strength and it would barely make it a fifth of the way across. The darker water towards the center of the river tells Sakura that there's a much faster, stronger current hiding beneath the relatively calm surface.

To some extent, Sakura understands that what she is tasked with doing is deeply unethical, for a few reasons. Using a civilian evacuation corridor to facilitate a mission will, upon either the completion of the mission or her discovery, undoubtedly bring greater scrutiny directed towards the refugees trying to escape to safety. It is possible that the ceasefire could fail and the corridor shut down completely. She is also technically impersonating a civilian in order to breach enemy lines, further endangering actual non-combatants. Both of these facts turn Sakura's stomach, and she glances guiltily at the refugees around her.

Her mission itself is also more than a little dubious. Allegedly, the plan was cooked up by both Konoha and Kusa brass alike, but Sakura doesn't know how much she believes that. She was told, at least, that Kusagakure is expecting a genin by the name of Sakura to potentially turn up somewhere on their turf, if she survives.

If being the operative word, there.

Dusk approaches rapidly, aided by thick storm clouds, and Sakura tries to look as unassuming as possible as she dithers around the riverbank. Staring listlessly into the water with a blank expression seems to do the trick just fine, which is great because it's what she wants to do anyway.

The bridge that stretches over the river is tall and arched, enough so that barges carrying loads of farmed goods can fit underneath and make their way north to the hidden village and the capital. Of course, no such barges have come this way since Iwa took over southern Kusa, but Sakura can imagine how it might have looked, once.

The bridge is also her ticket into Kusa's complex water system that is fed primarily by the Kusa river and runs all the way from the southernmost farmlands to the capital up north. According to her mission parameters, there's an outlet pipe located at the base of the western end of the bridge.

Sakura just has to find it and access it without drawing attention.

Now that night has fallen, many refugees are setting up camp along the river to wait out the dark and continue traveling in the morning. Sakura is among these folk, and chooses a spot near the bridge to curl up into a little ball. The wet grass is chilly and uncomfortable, and fat raindrops are beginning to fall, but she won't be here for long.

By the time that most of the remaining evacuees have settled and Sakura has steeled her nerves enough to move, the dampness has completely soaked through her shirt and pants. It's unpleasant. Ignoring the sticky fabric, Sakura once again picks her way down to the water's edge.

"Hey! What are you doing?"

Sakura freezes, turning just her head to find a man who she assumes is a shinobi stalking towards her. It's dark enough that Sakura can't easily make out his uniform. She can't tell if he's Kusa or Iwa. *Fuck.*

Heart pounding, Sakura fumbles for an excuse. “I…I had an accident,” she mutters, indicating the wet patches on her pants. “It was a nightmare and I—”

“That’s enough,” the shinobi cuts her off, embarrassment seeping into his tone. “Go ahead.”

Sakura nods, inwardly congratulating herself for the excuse. The shinobi pointedly does not follow her with his gaze as she steps into the chilly water, and instead hurriedly walks away with his head down. For all that shinobi are accustomed to guts and gore, she muses, bathroom talk still manages to unnerve many of them.

With one final breath, Sakura drops beneath the surface of the river, and the clock starts ticking. She can’t use any chakra manipulation until she’s deeper into the system and away from the senses of enemies on the surface, so vision enhancement (a trick she picked up in T&D) will have to wait. Framed by bridge beams, a shadowed aperture yawns at her like the mouth of a great beast. It’s circular and about as three-quarters wide as she is tall. Sakura swims toward it.

Thankfully, the pull of the current towards the outlet is greater than that of the river, and soon she can simply relax her body and allow it to be dragged into the opening. Not having to exert energy will extend the amount of time she can go without breathing.

As she was told to expect, there’s a metal grate just a few meters beyond the entrance of the pipe, preventing debris and fish from being pulled any further into the system. Sakura fumbles around the right edge of the grate and—there! She grips the small lever, fingers slipping on algae and wet rust, and wrenches. It takes a few tries, but the locking mechanism eventually releases. Pulling the grate open against the flow of the water proves to be significantly more difficult, however, and the *countdown ‘til drowning* is pounding like a drum in the back of Sakura’s mind.

Her chest feels like a vice. Bubbles escape from between her teeth as Sakura yanks with all of her might, cracking the grate *just* enough to squeeze her body past. It slams shut behind her, and Sakura knows she doesn’t have enough oxygen to open it again.

That realization doesn’t matter much anyway, because the water sweeps Sakura away, and she spends about four seconds careening ass over teacups in the current before the channel abruptly adopts a severe decline. The fall is short, Sakura skidding and bumping against the slimy walls of the pipe as she plunges downwards. Finally, she’s spat out into a larger duct that is once again level.

The wider canal means slower moving water, and blessedly, room enough to poke her head above the surface and gasp a few breaths. The air is thick with moisture and feels heavy in her lungs, but it’s better than drowning. Sakura draws chakra into her eyes, and quickly spots a series of rungs on the walls of the channel. They’re spaced about four meters apart, but they allow Sakura to control her speed in the water without having to swim against the current. Instead, she can just let herself be swept downstream, grabbing onto the rungs as she passes them to slow her momentum. Her pack bounces obnoxiously against her back with every stop, and Sakura hopes dearly that the waterproofing seal she’d placed on the inside is doing its job.

She travels this way for several minutes, and estimates the water's (and by extension, her) velocity to be approximately ten kilometers per hour. Therefore, she surmises it will take her a little under two hours to reach her destination, as long as she doesn't run into any disruptions.

"Kusa farmlands require a tremendous amount of water, but the river doesn't extend far enough south to accommodate them properly. Aqueducts have been built to supply an underground reservoir in southern Kusa, which is also connected to an adjacent sewer treatment plant. Waste-water from Kusagakure and the capital is cleansed by special seals before entering the reservoir. From there, the water is piped south to the Kusa farmland, and also back north to service the hidden village and capital."

It is an uncomfortable two hours. By the time she nears the end of her very wet, very cold journey, Sakura is shivering so hard she can barely draw a full breath. Getting flushed down the drain in the middle of winter is not, perhaps, the most pleasant thing she's ever experienced. Even the chakra-circulating trick she learned from Miyoshi-san can only do so much to keep her warm.

The abrupt end of the duct surprises Sakura, and she barely manages to grab the last rung before the pipe empties out into a reservoir several meters below.

And… *whoa.* The reservoir is bigger than Sakura could have imagined. It's an enormous concrete room with slanted walls, and there are two other massive outlet pipes dumping water into the basin like waterfalls. She can see huge seals written in dark red ink in and around those other two apertures, and there's a hum of chakra emanating from them. That must be the treated waste-water from Kusagakure and the capital, she realizes. The water pouring from the massive pipes looks perfectly clean, and Sakura takes a moment to admire the sheer innovation of such seals.

Remembering herself, Sakura scans the reservoir and tentatively reaches out with her chakra antennae. It doesn't *seem* like there's anyone in here, but she's got to be cautious anyway, and it's difficult to see much of the reservoir even with her vision enhanced. In fact, the opening to the duct appears to be somewhat obstructed, and Sakura has to duck in order to peer past the lip. When she cranes her neck, she finds a massive concrete gate hanging above her on a chain. Each link is as big as her head.

"Whoa," Sakura says aloud this time, following the chain with her eyes. She can see it's threaded through a fixed pulley, which appears to be connected to a ballast-like device floating in the water.

Intake control, she realizes. If the reservoir reaches a certain fill point, the ballast will fully float, therefore there is no force exerted on the pulley and the gate will rest fully shut. If the reservoir were empty, however, the weight of the ballast will lift the pipe cover.

It's smart. The Kusa river is not scant by any means, but if the recycled waste water is enough to supply the farmlands, then there's no need to draw from it. The duct is probably a little over three-quarters obstructed, and if she looks closely Sakura can see the concrete lowering millimeter by millimeter. Unfortunately, this means that if she dithers long enough, then her planned escape route will be sealed shut.

Sakura swallows. There's no time to waste.

She lands on the ballast with light feet, and it barely bobs a centimeter. From here Sakura can see that there is also a small deck protruding from the far wall, and a steel door. An access point for operation and maintenance, she presumes. Also a potential source of Iwa guards.

It's easy enough to find the huge outlet pipes beneath the water, and they're each helpfully distinguished by a single character carved into the concrete above them; north and south.

Biting her lip, Sakura digs out the payload from her pack. The waterproofing seals apparently did their job, and the tags are dry as a bone. The tags she is supposed to place on the southbound outlet.

The tags that will release a slow-acting poison for roughly a week before they disappear. Sakura reflexively smooths them out, though they're not really wrinkled at all, and recalls one of the last conversations she had with her superiors before she'd left on this mission.

"Won't this…kill a lot of civilians? Won't that be bad for Kusa?" Sakura asks the tent at large, fists once again clenched tightly on the hem of her shirt. Was that question seditious? Is the next inquiry on her tongue, but she manages to hold back this time.

Lieutenant Matsuo twirls a kunai between his fingers as he regards Sakura. However, it is not him who speaks next, but a stout woman whom Sakura is marginally certain is an Akimichi. "Between a young and healthy twenty-something and an elderly person, who do you think has a better chance of surviving a viral infection?" the woman asks.

Sakura is utterly nonplussed by the non-sequitur. She blinks, and says, "Uh, the younger person. Immune systems weaken with age."

"Most of the time, you would be right," the woman answers. "However, certain viruses induce an immune response so severe that the lungs flood with fluid, and the individual quite literally drowns on dry land. The response itself is more damaging than the virus."

Sakura waits for further elaboration. She receives it.

"This toxin is activated by chakra. The more chakra one has, the more severely they will be poisoned. For example, the average civilian will get very ill, but there's only about a three percent chance they'll die. On the other hand, a tokubetsu jounin will have about a forty percent chance."

Most of the civilians have evacuated Kusa at this point, she knows, but it's a weak consolation regardless. She's going to be responsible for a fucking mass-poisoning event. There will undoubtedly be non-combatant casualties. Kids, maybe. Animals too. Sakura isn't extremely familiar with the Konoha Articles of War, but she's pretty sure there's something in there that outlaws this sort of act.

But that doesn't change the fact that she's here and she has orders, so Sakura takes a deep breath and plunges beneath the frigid water.

It's almost too easy to apply the seals. She presses them into the walls of the pipe a few meters downstream, away from obvious detection. The pull of the water is surprisingly gentle. She figured it would be like a vacuum.

The hum of chakra emanating from them is weak enough that it's mostly occluded by the energy emitted by the cleansing seals, though there shouldn't be much apprehension anyway. The poison will take on average four days to manifest any symptoms, and the seals will dissolve in five. By the time any suspicion is aroused, plenty of damage will be done.

When Sakura surfaces, she notices a few things in quick succession. One, there are at least two chakra signatures making their way towards her from the direction of that door on the wall, and two, that the water level in the room is suddenly rising much, *much* more quickly. But why—?

The fucking rainstorm.

Sakura whips around and curses. The way she came in is nearly closed off, the ballast rising rapidly now, and she's *not* about to try and fight her way out of here.

She's out of time. This horrible place is going to become her watery tomb.

Sakura treads water for a moment, considering. She's going to die here, that's fairly certain at this point. The exit of least suffering would probably be to see herself out, so to speak—and that's what suicide seals are for, aren't they, after all?

(Ozawa-san hadn't been the one to give her the seal. It was Matsuo, the red-haired man who greenlit her nomination for this mission. Blessedly, he knocked her out for it, since her gag reflex probably would have impeded the application process.)

The seal sits at the very back of her tongue, near her epiglottis. If she focuses the right amount of chakra into it with the right pattern, it will release a neurotoxin so potent she'll be dead within minutes. Not a particularly pleasant thought, but older versions of suicide seals just asphyxiated their victim or burned a hole in their trachea. Hers is merciful in contrast.

Ah, the luxuries of modern shinobi life, Sakura muses to herself as she begins the flick-flick-flicker of chakra into the seal. It's odd that she's so unafraid. Perhaps because none of this feels real…none of it has felt real for months, like she's watching someone else pilot her body. The word *dissociation* comes to mind.

Any ruminating on that thought, however, and the activation of her seal are rather abruptly interrupted by a muffled *bang* and a brief shuddering, and suddenly Sakura's entire world is dark, cold water.

(Later she will conclude that some sort of release mechanism in one of the outlet tunnels was activated by the rapidly rising water level, and Sakura got sucked down into the tunnel like she was flushed down a toilet. Splendid.)

Sakura barely keeps from gasping—a death sentence, and not an easy one–as she plunges. It's like the world's worst waterslide, and also she's drowning.

Moments crawl by. Sakura plummets and plummets, bouncing off the walls of the tunnel in her descent. Her lungs are on fire, her whole body in agony. There's no room in her brain to focus her chakra. Panic begins to ring in her head like a bell, all previous numbness gone in the face of such a horrifying death.

Please, please, mom, dad, anybody—please!

Suddenly, the pipe veers upward, and, blessedly, *blessedly,* Sakura's head breaches the surface. She sucks down a few greedy breaths, feeling the momentum of the water begin to slow as gravity fights against its ascent–and then, just as suddenly, the pipe nosedives again. Sakura is submerged once more.

The careening tumble begins anew. Her chest heaves with the desperation for oxygen, and somehow she's burning, *blazing* despite the frigid water. Every muscle in her body is being wound tighter and tighter, so far past their limit that stars are exploding behind her eyelids.

Just when Sakura is certain that she's about to black out, that *this is it;* the pipe detours upwards again, giving her a few precious seconds above water. Every breath is a ragged gasp. It fuels her brain with just enough consciousness to become aware of the screaming agony igniting her body.

Hypoxia is a real bitch.

Far too soon the pipe drops beneath her, gravity yanking Sakura beneath the surface like a demon dragging her down into hell.

This tortuous cycle goes on and on. The pipe rises and falls like clockwork, and some distant, semi-functioning fraction of Sakura's brain hypothesizes it's designed to help the water travel a slight incline, or perhaps to speed the flow. Hopefully, the people at the other end of this hellish rollercoaster are Kusa, not Iwa.

Though that hardly matters if this kills her, and it very well might. Again and again, Sakura is at her limit, mere milliseconds away from sucking in a lungful of water when the pipe will finally rise, allowing her scant heartbeats of reprieve before she's plunged back into the frothy, icy depths. Approximately eighty-two seconds of descent followed by twelve seconds of ascent. It is pure torment.

With every breach, Sakura's brain grows fuzzier, her gasps grow weaker, more desperate. The crashing of the water is muffled by the white noise in her ears and the aching in her flesh has given way to numbness, and Sakura finally thinks yes, it is time. It's time to let go.

When Sakura begins what she knows will be her final descent, she finally allows her body to relax. The water sweeps her away in its chilly embrace, and she opens her mouth to breathe in when—

Light. Bright and blinding, even from behind her closed lids. And a rush of air, filling her lungs with a piercing, glorious chill. She's still falling so how could this be?

Sakura hits the pool beneath the exit of the pipe with a crash. Her limbs are jelly, far too weak to swim, and she begins to sink. Her eyes are open now, and she can see the sunlight filtering down into the water. It's the most beautiful thing she's ever seen, and apparently it will be the last. She has this thought just as a shadow eclipses the sun.

The next few moments are a blur of noise and splashing and confusion, and at Sakura's next most conscious moment, she finds herself sitting on the bank of a small retention basin. There is an empty field stretching before her, and what looks like a series of silos. A man and woman are crouched beside her dressed in Kusa fatigues, though they appear more concerned than hostile. They probably think some poor orphan fell down a well and got spit out here.

Before they can begin an interrogation, Sakura mumbles the code phrase she was told to provide to Kusa allies in the event of her successful escape.

Matsuo had recited it to her with the demeanor of someone humoring a formality.

Sakura is just grateful her hypoxic brain can even recall it.

"Y-you have nice sunsets here in Kusa," she mutters, hacking up what feels like a lungful of water. "I've always w-wanted to see them."

This gives the pair of nin pause. Then, the man speaks cautiously, "Yes, but the real attraction is the beer. Do you drink?"

Sakura can't stop the sardonic smirk that curls her lips. "Like a fish."

"You will be escorted back to your outpost in a few hours. For now, you will be sent to one of our field hospitals to be assessed and treated if need be."

Sakura nods, and is summarily whisked away to an athletic arena that appears to be converted into a temporary medical center. She is placed on a cot (and *wow* does it feel nice to kick her heels up) and mostly ignored for a while before a very tired-looking Kusa medic-nin materializes before her.

"Haruno Sakura?" they ask, and Sakura nods.

Without another word, the medic-nin begins poking and prodding at Sakura, shining a light in her eyes and moving her limbs this way and that. Finally, they cluck their tongue at their clipboard and say, "Well, other than a few scratches and bumps, mild hypothermia and a rather severe state of malnourishment, you seem to be alright."

Sakura nods silently.

"I would heal your scratches, but as it is, we can only afford to treat life-threatening injuries right now," they continue. "However, I will have some food sent over shortly."

Sakura nods again and the medic moves to leave, but a curiosity niggling at the back of Sakura's head pops out of her mouth before she can stop herself.

“When you heal wounds, how does it work?”

The medic blinks. “What do you mean?”

Sakura frowns, trying to figure out how to properly phrase her question. “Is it like a chakra-bandage? Do you generate the tissue with your medical chakra, or is it more like you hijack their cellular function and speed up the natural process?”

For some reason, the inquiry makes the medic snort. *“Hijack* is a bit of a biased term, but functionally that is correct,” they answer. “Mystic Palm accelerates the natural healing process.”

Sakura hums. “Do you supply the energy needed for the metabolic processes, or is that also borrowed from the patient?” she asks, scratching her chin in thought. Her knowledge of the specifics is coming up woefully short. “I imagine it could be difficult to heal starving or severely weakened patients, but providing everything would be a lot more draining on the healer.”

That gets the medic’s attention, and they turn to face Sakura fully once more. “It depends. Chakra artificially stimulates the cell-signaling required for tissue regeneration, which is primarily accomplished by fibroblasts. They can be activated by a variety of chemical signals that promote proliferation and cellular differentiation. Depending on their level of control, a healer can be selective about how they activate those cellular signaling pathways.”

Sakura nods.

The medic continues, apparently happy to talk shop. “However, the actual building blocks of tissue like collagen, which is basically the scaffolding for tissue regeneration, require specific amino acids and other cofactors to form. Mystic Palm can’t supply those and they must be sourced from the patient.”

Sakura blinks, and a tidbit from a book she read in her past life suddenly appears in her head. “Is that why hospitals are always serving orange juice?” she wonders aloud. “I remember reading that vitamin-C is important for making collagen.”

The medic lets out a quiet, genuine laugh. “That is correct, but I think it might just be because orange juice makes everyone happy, and happy people are in short supply in hospitals,” they say, audibly amused.

“That makes sense,” Sakura says sagely, and the medic offers her a small smile before they disappear.

A little while later, when a bowl of mostly unidentifiable mush is placed in front of her, Sakura discovers a single, small orange candy hidden in the napkin.

She sucks on the candy slowly, savoring it, and thinks it might be the best thing she’s ever tasted in her life.

Sakura's return to the outpost is met with almost entirely disbelief, which is irksome but ultimately not unexpected.

"We thought you just up and died somewhere," Ozawa-san remarks as he hands her another blank explosive tag. "Where were you, anyway?"

Sakura doesn't think she's allowed to say. "That's…classified," she mutters lamely, which earns her a belly laugh from both Miyoshi-san and Ozawa-san.

"Sure, kiddo," Miyoshi-san says, wire glinting between his fingers.

Sakura scowls. "Don't you have pits of knives you need to lure children into?" she snips, a little unkindly. Sakura almost drowned a hundred times over to complete her mission and she can't even fucking take credit for it.

(Later, Sakura will be thankful for anonymity, but right now it sucks.)

Miyoshi-san just laughs even harder.

When reports start to trickle in over the next few days of Iwa and Ame shinobi dropping like flies from some mysterious affliction, something shaped like *hope* starts to percolate amongst the troops again. Sakura can scarcely enjoy it, because Mizuki's coldly furious gaze follows her every step.

A week later, Konoha and Kusa drive Iwa and Ame back to the border.

Two days after that, Sakura "volunteers" for another mission.

Dear Mama and Papa,

You would be proud. I'm not able to do much, but what I can do, I'm doing well.

Stay safe.

Sakura

They dye her hair again and have her blow up an Iwa field hospital.

Sakura only survives because she crawls into a wagon of corpses right before the detonation.

Not long after, she and the bodies are tipped into a shallow grave and left unburied. Sakura is soaked with gore and fluids too rancid to name when she slips away amongst the chaos.

Dear Mama and Papa,

My birthday is in a couple months. I hope next year we can spend it together.

Sakura

Sakura is pretty sure there is a term for what she is doing, and that term is *war crimes*.

She has a lot of nightmares.

After another field hospital goes up in flames, she gets a longer break because a bunch of Fish die in a rockslide and Mizuki is briefly saddled with more menial labor than normal. Sakura seizes this opportunity to pester any medic nin who will spare her two seconds, and eventually aggregates enough knowledge to attempt her own version of Mystic Palm on some very, very unlucky mice.

The first mouse burns to a crisp. The second mouse nearly ruptures from the amount of tumors that appear. The third mouse's whiskers grow uncontrollably until she kills it.

The fourth mouse turns snow white. And then black. And then back to brown. Then orange, then spotted like a cow, then striped like a tiger. Sakura smiles so brightly for the next two days that Miyoshi-san smacks her in the back of the head just to get it to stop.

At first Sakura is limited to more natural pigments, like brown and black and gray, but there are a lot of mice scuttling around the mess tent and Sakura doesn't sleep much these days. After some fiddling, she can turn them into nearly any color in the visible spectrum. Then she figures out how to give the mice long, curly fur, or make it all fall out. Their skin is next.

When Sakura is finally brave enough to try it on herself, she makes her hair a mousy brown first, then bright purple, and finally hacks it all off with a kunai. Less than a minute later it reaches her waist again, pink like her namesake. She's careful not to have too much fun with her new trick (the current working name is Chameleon Technique) because even hair takes calories to grow, and she doesn't have many of those to spare.

Too soon, however, Mizuki is grabbing her shoulder and dragging her into the officer's tent. This time, when they hand her a bottle of dye, she waves it away.

A day later, she burns down a warehouse containing nearly twenty thousand kilograms of rice, and the five Iwa shinobi who were inside. Nobody sees her because she's gray and black and mottled like the rocks, nobody senses her because she doesn't need an illusion to hide.

The missions aren't always so melodramatic. A couple times Sakura is simply instructed to live up to her Meatshield Brigade duties and make sure some clan member doesn't take a hit, by any means necessary. Her combat skills remain dogshit, but she manages to stab a few people. And as it turns out, Sakura's chakra antennae can sense incoming projectiles, and not just explosive tags. It's the split-second heads-up that they provide on one such occasion that allows Sakura to both shove the Uchiha into the dirt and turn her own body in such a way that she becomes a very bloody pin-cushion, but not a dead one.

When Sakura returns to the outpost alive—and much more importantly, successful—for the *seventh time* from what by all accounts was supposed to be another suicide mission, she starts

to gain a bit of a reputation, and a nickname.

Of course, it can't be something badass like Sakura the Deathless.

"Fuckin' hard to kill, ain'tcha?" that one T&D woman whistles appreciatively. "Like a goddamn—"

Roach. They just start calling her Roach.

"Roaches are a kind of fish too, so it suits you even better," Miyoshi-san tells her over the fire one evening. Sakura throws a rock at him.

Days pass, Konoha slowly gains ground, Mizuki continues to volunteer Sakura for deadly missions and Sakura, well… she just keeps on not dying.

Life continues this way, until Mizuki gets his ass half blown up by an exploding tag and is shipped back to Konoha for the foreseeable future. Around the same time, Sakura's outpost is informed that a few heavy-hitters will be stationed there to stage a push further into Iwa territory.

Sakura wrinkles her nose at that, nudging her foot against that of Inuzuka Kagome (the bestower of her new moniker, as it were). "Why are we trying to take over their land?" she asks the night before the big-wigs are supposed to show up. "I thought we were just trying to keep them from annexing countries like Kusa and Taki."

Inuzuka-sempai looks at Sakura like she's a complete fucking idiot, and maybe she is.

"Iwa is fuckin' insane, kid. We thought they'd learned their lesson after the third war, but obviously not," Inuzuka-sempai growls. "We need to crush em' so thoroughly they can't even *imagine* trying to start some shit like this again."

Sakura considers this. If memory serves, the end of the third war resulted in sanctions so severe against Iwa that their economy was crippled for years, and never really recovered. It's not like Iwa invaded Kusa ten months ago while yelling *this is payback!* but it's hard to imagine a different reason. That all being said, it does seem like a pretty fucking dumb move on Iwa's part. The events playing out now seem to be a grotesque parody of those of the third war. Sakura wonders absently if the Sandaime plans on trying to destroy Iwa's hidden village entirely.

"Those who know history are apparently stupid enough to repeat it anyway," is what she ends up saying out loud, which sends Inuzuka-sempai into peals of laughter.

The arrival of the new forces is heralded with much hubbub and excitement, though in Sakura's opinion it mostly means that the number of people allowed to cut in the mess line has increased. Apparently, it includes the Yellow Flash and his squad. Sakura keeps her distance when they roll into camp.

Her avoidance doesn't succeed for long, however. The Yellow Flash is a seal-master in addition to being the fastest shinobi alive, so he makes a stop by the T&D tent for tag

production. Sakura is so busily hunched over an electrocution seal that she doesn't even notice his arrival.

It's not common knowledge, but there are two ways to actually arm an exploding or electrocution seal. First, all of the chakra can be provided during the creation, but this is significantly taxing on the seal-maker. Alternatively, a charge array can be written into the seal and primed with a small jolt of chakra. Depending on the size of the seal, it will then take between two to twenty hours to fully charge and be ready for use. Using a charge array probably seems like the obvious choice, but they're extremely tricky to get right, and a faulty array can result in a dud or misfire.

Sakura knows this personally (having had a few memorable backfires) and is therefore extremely focused when writing one. This is why she doesn't notice the person peering over her shoulder, despite generally being a pretty situationally-aware shinobi.

As it is, Sakura finishes the last stroke and holds the tag up into the light of the lantern, turning it this way and that with a critical eye.

"Interesting choice, using the characters for heaven and earth as stabilizers," someone comments from behind her.

Sakura shakes her head, too busy scanning the strokes for mistakes to really listen. "It's more of a failsafe," she corrects. "Some of the Iwa-nin figured out how to partially ground themselves with chakra. These make it so the earth around the tag is positively charged, so they can't discharge the electricity that way anymore."

"Ingenious!"

Sakura scratches her chin. "Eh, it's serviceable. I'm still trying to figure out how to increase the working radius."

Then she turns around, and nearly sets off the tag in her hands.

Namikaze Minato, the Konoha Yellow Flash, is smiling down at her, looking just as handsome as he does on the posters.

Sakura scrambles to her feet in order to give a proper bow. "N-Namikaze-sama! I didn't realize—"

But the man is already waving his hand, looking terribly awkward. "Oh goodness, please just call me Minato."

Sakura blinks, unbending a fraction. "Minato…sama?" Even that sounds horribly impudent to her ears.

He sighs. "I guess…"

Strange. Sakura straightens fully to look at the man, who is fidgeting. This awkward, nervous person is the Konoha Yellow Flash? The fastest shinobi alive, whose bingo book entry just says *flee on sight?*

Suddenly, Sakura remembers her manners. “My name is Haruno Sakura, I serve in Squad 5C of the Combat and Field Assistance division.” She bows again. “It is an honor to meet you, sir.”

Now he looks confused, and Sakura wonders briefly if he’s trying to figure out why a member of the School is being allowed to fuck around with seals in a T&D tent.

Sakura doesn’t know how to explain the uniqueness of her situation (and isn’t really interested in doing so) but thankfully she’s rescued from having to do that anyway by someone else entering the tent.

Ozawa-san holds open the flap, allowing a tall, silver-haired man in a mask to lean in.

“Sensei, it’s time for a briefing,” he says in a low, lazy voice. Sakura is instantly intrigued.

His gaze slides over to her, and then to the paper in her hand. His lone visible brow pops infinitesimally upwards and he says, “Kids shouldn’t play with seals.”

Sakura’s intrigue is instantly replaced with annoyance.

However, Ozawa-san is the one who answers. “Roach here is one of the best sealers we have,” he says, astonishing Sakura. “Only reason she’s still officially CFA is ‘cause her sarge is stingy.”

The silver-haired man only blinks slowly at the declaration, while Sakura internally reels at the sudden praise. Minato-sama hums thoughtfully.

“Would you come sit with us after the briefing?” the blond man asks, and Sakura wonders if she’s hallucinating.

“We’ll be at the westmost commander’s campfire. It’s been a while since I’ve had the chance to talk to a fellow creative,” he adds, smiling a little timidly. For some reason, it pisses Sakura off.

But what Sakura actually says is, “Yes, sir,” because she’s not stupid enough to refuse.

The men vanish. Sakura writes her next several seals without ever really seeing them.

Later, when Sakura is loitering near-ish to the commander’s campfire, she considers, for the first time, deserting.

Not deserting the whole war, no—but bailing on this particular obligation. Somehow, the concept of socializing with some bigwigs is far more daunting than any explosive seal she’s ever had to disarm.

She catches a glimpse of bright yellow hair, and yup, this is not worth it, who cares if she gets in trouble. Sakura whirls, fully intent on scuttling back to hide in her tent when she walks face-first into something tall and human-shaped.

Well, shit. It's the silver-haired guy.

"Going somewhere?" he asks, peering down at her. He's easily two heads taller at least. It irritates her instantaneously.

"No," she denies pointlessly. Good to know that her stubbornness isn't quite deceased, yet. "I'm cold. I was just turning around to grab my flak jacket." The flimsy scrap of fabric and armor could hardly be recognized as such, but it did offer a meager resistance to the chill.

He doesn't move, just blinking slowly again, and reminding her of a large, predatory cat. One of his eyes is covered by a cloth, so it's more like he's winking.

"We'll be sitting around a fire," he points out, which is a fair observation, but Sakura is probably distantly related to a mule because the idea of conceding doesn't even occur to her.

"I have poor thermoregulation," she responds, which elicits—dare she say it—an amused snort.

"Mm," he not-agrees with a nod. "You can borrow my blanket. C'mon."

And that's how Sakura ends up sitting on a log by the westmost commander's campfire, flanked by the Yellow Flash and his odd, silver-haired disciple, all while wrapped up in a stranger's blanket like a swaddled baby. The other members of the team—a guy chewing on a rather mean-looking senbon, a man with bleak eyes and a weird headguard, and the prettiest lady that Sakura has ever seen, who is also a medic, based on her gear—are perched on their own logs with varying levels of cheer.

The silence is so awkward that Sakura semi-seriously considers throwing herself into the fire just to make it stop.

"Haruno-san, I took a look at your file," Minato-sama suddenly says, and Sakura feels her stomach plummet. "You have…quite the resumé."

She just looks down at her hands.

"I think someone with your experience would be very useful to my team," he continues, and *there* it is. Of course.

"How would you like to join my squad for a few missions?"

She forgets to breathe for a few seconds. It's phrased like a question, though Sakura knows it's anything but.

Even with Mizuki gone, she's still destined to be thrown to the proverbial wolves. A meatshield until the very end. Maybe this is when they finally have her walk into an enemy camp with the explosive seals written into her skin. She's dreamed about that more than once.

"Of course, sir," she eventually murmurs.

Senbon-guy whistles, flipping through some papers in his hands once more before he waves them at her. “Shit on a biscuit, kid. This is one hell of a track record. I’d ask whose wheaties you pissed in but it looks like you volunteered for all of this yourself.” He shakes the papers again—her file, she surmises. “You tryin’ to be a career terrorist or somethin’?”

Sakura says nothing.

“There are easier ways to kill yourself, you know,” silver-hair says mildly from beside her.

Ha. As if she hasn’t spent every waking moment of those fucking missions trying her damndest to scrape through in one piece. “I was given orders and I followed them,” Sakura eventually manages around the lump in her throat.

The Yellow Flash sighs, looking askance at his teammate. “And Konoha is grateful for the sacrifices you’ve made and risks you’ve taken, aren’t we, Kakashi?”

Silver-hair—Kakashi, apparently—doesn’t grace that with a concession.

“How exactly *did* you manage to infiltrate repeatedly?” Senbon-guy asks, tone skeptical. “Your hair is not exactly inconspicuous, and a genjutsu specialist wouldn’t be stuck in CFA.”

Internally, Sakura snorts. As if this chump knows fuck-all about the School.

The pretty lady snorts externally. “There’s this thing called dye, Genma,” she points out dryly.

Wordlessly, Sakura changes her hair to brown.

That gets everyone’s attention right-quick. “The fuck?” Genma’s teeth close around his senbon with a clack. “How’d you cast an illusion with no seal?”

Sakura changes it back to pink. “It’s not an illusion.”

His lip curls. “Bullshit.”

“She’s right, it’s not.” Kakashi has turned towards her fully now, and Sakura is shocked to see his left eye exposed, and even more shocked to see the blood-red iris and spinning tomoe. The Uchiha bloodline? *How?*

Sakura knows from having to guard a few of them that the Uchiha are all creepily clone-like from a combination of inbreeding and carefully curated genetic-outsourcing. There’s no way Kakashi is one of them. Just who the fuck *are* these people?

Sakura’s musings are cut short by a question from the pretty medic.

“How did you do that, Sakura-chan?”

Sakura blinks. From anyone else, the affectionate honorific would earn at best an unimpressed scowl and at worst a tiny seal that increases static electricity secretly slapped

onto the back of their shirt. As it is, Sakura simply decides she would die for this woman in a heartbeat.

After all, one of Sakura's specialties is extreme and selective loyalty.

"It's a variation of Mystic Palm," she reveals, which clearly surprises the woman. "I'm just playing with the biochemistry."

Whatever the medic's response is to that is cut off by Genma's next comment. "Your file doesn't say you're a medic nin."

And what Sakura wants to say to that is that it sounds like her file is complete bullshit anyway, but she just shrugs. "I'm not, but a few medics were kind enough to explain the basics. I have pretty good chakra control."

Genma is nodding slowly in the way that people do when they don't understand what's going on but don't really care to figure it out. He also looks pretty suspicious, which is not a good expression to have directed at you from a superior officer.

Sakura shrugs again and adds, "And there are a lot of mice in the mess tent."

"That's impressive, Haruno-san." Minato-sama this time. Her gaze slides over to him.

"Is there anything else you've, uh…improvised?"

Sakura scratches her chin and opts for honesty. No point in keeping secrets here. "Um, I can turn a chakra sensory net into long, twisty things. Kinda like antennae," she offers. "And I can hear and feel stuff from the ground if I focus chakra into my feet, like figuring out where people or traps are."

Genma whistles. "No wonder they call you Roach."

Is that in her file too? It's annoying to think that the unflattering moniker might be immortalized on paper, but the amused smirk on Genma's face is far preferable to his look of suspicion. She'll take it.

"Sakura."

Sakura blinks at Kakashi, surprised by the direct address. His voice is nice, some strange part of her brain notes.

"Would it be alright if I copied that technique?" he asks, gesturing to his left eye. *Copy?* Sakura doesn't know much about the sharingan beyond that one eye that has it is orders of magnitude more important than her life (or the lives of hundreds of Fish)...but a copy-cat bloodline *would* be pretty nifty.

She shrugs and says, "Sure." Sakura then dutifully goes through the short list of modifications she's mastered: changing her skin and hair color, growing the latter out and altering its texture. She even changes the colors of her irises (a recent, if somewhat risky development) just to show off a bit.

“Incredible,” the medic (Rin, she later learns) breathes. “Did you learn how to do the traditional Mystic Palm, too?”

Sakura’s mouth twists thoughtfully. “No,” she admits. But that *would* be a pretty good idea, huh. Somehow the thought of trying to heal herself hadn’t really occurred to her, for all of her death-defying antics. Funny.

Rin smiles at her, and Sakura might be in love. “Can I teach it to you?”

Sakura is nodding before she even finishes the question. “Yes, please.”

“Unfortunately, that will have to wait,” Kakashi cuts in, and Sakura does something she hasn’t done since she was dumped here all those months ago—she pouts.

His visible brow raises (a frequent tic of his, evidently). “We need to discuss the upcoming mission. Your puppy-eyes are certainly compelling, but I have eight dogs, so I’m immune.”

Sakura forgets ever having been irritated at this person and immediately hopes to gain his favor. “You have eight dogs?” she demands, forgoing the decorum that rank usually begets from her. “As pets?”

Kakashi blinks at her before a marginally less stony expression takes over his face. “As summons, so really it’s more like I have eight very furry, occasionally very slobbery coworkers.”

Sakura nods, already envisioning the luxurious joy of cuddling with eight actual, soft, sweet dogs. It’s the most frivolous thought she’s allowed herself to have in a while.

The faint amusement in Kakashi’s eye grows before flattening into something more businesslike. “The mission,” he reiterates, gaze moving to Minato-sama.

“Yes, right,” the Yellow Flash mutters, and digs out a scroll from his flak jacket. “The premise is pretty simple, but the execution will probably be a bit tricky.”

The premise: destroying the Kannabi Bridge, which seems easy enough. Damage any one support structure enough and the mass of the bridge and gravity will do the rest of the work. Sakura has blown up enough things at this point to actually have a semi-informed opinion about that, which is a little weird in and of itself.

What’s also weird is the way that everyone’s face darkens every time the words *Kannabi Bridge* are spoken. So, there’s some history there. Sakura doesn’t care to know what it is.

The tricky parts are 1. the bridge is located behind Iwa borders and 2. it is protected by a set of three seals that must be removed simultaneously in order to be dispelled. They will work in teams of two to remove the seals, with one assigned to deactivate it while the other deals with any hostiles.

Sakura is paired with Kakashi, which is fine, though she would have preferred Rin.

“Kakashi, you and Sakura will take the seal on the underside of the southmost end of the bridge, Genma and Yamato will take the northmost end. Rin and I will remove the seal located in the watchtower nearby.”

Sakura frowns, trying to envision how that will work. She can climb trees like any Konoha brat, but scaling the underside of a bridge with any modicum of efficiency…

“Will there be some form of climbing gear?” she asks, feeling dumb. “My upper-body strength isn’t all that great.”

The entire team stares at her like she’s said something ridiculous.

Finally, Genma asks incredulously, “You don’t know how to *tree-walk?”*

And this. *This* is one of the things Sakura hates the most about being out here. More than the trenchfoot, more than the constant filth, the blood, the mosquitoes, the hunger…no, what Sakura really fucking hates is adults getting angry at her for not knowing things she quite literally has no earthly way of knowing.

“No one taught me,” she bites out, feeling defensive. Sakura doesn't even know what tree-walking is, let alone how to do it.

Kakashi silently stands, ambles over to a nearby tree and then fucking defies gravity by walking straight up the trunk. Honestly, Sakura doesn’t know why this is impressive to her—she blows up people with pieces of paper. Being a shinobi is all about defying the laws of reality.

He raises an eyebrow at her. “Think you can master it by tomorrow?”

She masters it in minutes.

During their trek to the border, Kakashi tells her all about his eight dogs.

Pakkun, Bull, Urushi, Akino, Shiba, Bisuke, Guruko, Uhei.

As she waits for their zone to be cleared of any hostiles, Sakura recites the names with the cadence of a nursery rhyme.

Pakkun, Bull, Urushi, Akino, Shiba, Bisuke, Guruko, Uhei…

They blow up the bridge. Then they go back to camp. Sakura isn’t used as bait or a human shield.

It’s a miracle.

Sakura becomes a semi-permanent fixture on Team Yellow flash after that. Most of the other members appear content to keep her at a wary arm’s length, though Rin-san does teach her

Mystic Palm, and Kakashi introduces her to the ninken. Mizuki is still out on medical leave, so her transfer isn't official, but no one from the CFA says anything to her about it.

Genma is the only one seemingly bothered by her sudden recruitment, though Sakura is smart enough to not take it personally. She's young, weak, and relatively inexperienced at the high-level missions they engage in, even counting her stunts as Roach. He's just concerned for the safety of his team, and she gets that. Sakura wants them to stay safe, too.

His somewhat chilly attitude remains until one evening when a prisoner of war is brought back into camp for interrogation, and Team Yellow Flash is observing because his intel is relevant to an upcoming mission. The man, a rather nondescript Iwa shinobi, is tied to a chair in the middle of the tent and sweating something fierce.

Sakura's nose twitches. There, out of nowhere, is the smell of cooking meat.

The T&I specialist standing before the prisoner suddenly lurches forward and rips open the man's clothes, rending his Iwa fatigues and brown flak vest in two. And—*aha*. That's why it smells like barbecue.

Burning rapidly on the man's chest is an explosive seal, written into his skin. Large enough to leave this half of the camp nothing but a smoking crater.

"Hit the deck!"

Everyone but Sakura bolts, a mad scramble of chakra-boosted sprints. It is testament to Kakashi's faith in Sakura's common sense that he didn't just scruff her by the back of her shirt and drag her with him—which later, according to him, was a lapse in judgment he will never make again—leaving her free to dash towards the man instead.

Sakura doesn't think, she just moves.

Her palms slap onto the man's chest and it's like grabbing a red-hot pan. Her flesh screams in protest, but her choices at this point are burnt hands or becoming literal vapor, so. She doesn't waver.

Sakura begins to feed her chakra into the seal, forcing it in the reverse direction. The energy fights her, thrashing against her chakra like a wounded animal, but hundreds of hours of resetting thousands of seals makes the work muscle memory, if a little bit more labor-intensive.

The man starts to scream, and Sakura realizes that the energy from the seal—far too much to be simply reversed and re-stored—is burning him up from the inside out. His flesh bubbles and curls and drips under her palms like bacon in a pan, and her skin is getting a similar treatment. Absently, she thinks she'll be lucky if her hands are anything more than ash after all of this.

The work is slow, agonizingly so. Sakura's entire world has narrowed down to the flesh and seal under her hands and the flow of her own chakra.

Millimeter by blazing millimeter, she wrestles the seal into submission as it boils the Iwa-nin alive.

Sweat drips down Sakura's brow, off her nose, and she notices another voice has joined in with his wails of pain. Her own, she realizes distantly. The pain in her hands is beyond anything she's ever imagined, and her ears are full of white noise.

She's close. So, so close.

Darkness begins to close in on the corners of her vision, and it is only then that Sakura gets a little nervous. Her chakra is getting very low, and very fast.

Fuck. After all of this, she's going to run out of chakra before the seal does. Once again her pissant little reserves will be her reckoning. Sakura just hopes that her interference will reduce the blast radius significantly enough to lessen the number of casualties.

Right before Sakura is certain she's going to pass out, a warmth appears behind her, pressing against her back. Large hands settle atop her own, and a flash of yellow in the corner of her eye tells her everything she needs to know.

Minato is here, which means she might just survive yet.

Sakura leans back against him for support, feeling steadier. His chakra seeps into her hands like a balm, the splash of cool water after a bad burn.

Together, they reverse the seal the rest of the way. The Iwa-nin is limp and silent long before they're finished.

The pair step away from the corpse—which is really more of a vaguely human-shaped piece of charcoal, now—and Sakura's back remains glued to Minato's front, mainly due to the fact that she will absolutely fall flat on her face without the support.

The din around her is opaque, a muffled hum that fades in and out as Sakura's head grows heavier by the second. She looks down at her hands, and doesn't really recognize them. They look bad, is really all she can deduce.

This whole ordeal…despite the gruesomeness, it *has* given her an idea.

Sakura smiles to herself. Then, darkness.

Genma—and everyone, really—is much friendlier after that.

Her hands are salvaged by Rin's exemplary Mystic Palm, and some of her own homebrew skin regeneration. When all is said and done, the flesh of her palms is disturbingly pristine; her weapons calluses completely gone.

It's almost weirder than scars.

Dear Mama and Papa,

I've never been much of an artist, but my calligraphy has gotten pretty good since I got out here. Writing these letters helps a lot.

I hope I get to see you two soon.

Sakura

Sakura likes Kakashi, even though he's a little unusual. She likes his voice and the way he never loses his cool. She's less fond of his reflexively dismissive attitude. More importantly, perhaps, the little creature in her chest—the same one that compelled her to seek out Uchiha Sasuke's affection—likes him, and considers him hers. It's a different feeling than the one she had towards Sasuke…there are no fantasies of hand holding or dates or marriage. Just a quiet and unshakeable conviction that this person is hers to protect.

It's always so sudden. The creature latched on to Rin right away, sinking its claws in deep that first night at the commander's campfire. Now, as she watches Kakashi from across the tent, the beast licks its teeth before its lips curl into a pleased snarl.

Mine, he's mine.

Sakura starts to follow him everywhere, which he doesn't seem to mind. They become a persistent, if a little mismatched, pair.

It's this behavior that earns Sakura another new moniker to add to her ever-extending list: *Kakashi's guard dog.* It's up there along with *Roach,* and *Pinky* but she doesn't mind it. Genma calls her *brat* and Rin never gives up on the *chan* honorific even though it doesn't suit her at all. She's *Haruno-san* to Minato and merely *Haruno* to Yamato. She doesn't like that much, either. The sound of her surname grows more and more alien to Sakura every time she hears it.

But Kakashi? Kakashi just calls her Sakura.

Several weeks pass before Sakura gets a chance to test out her *idea*—and by test out, she means just fucking go for it because what does she have to lose, anyway?—which is how she ends up laying on her back in a T&D tent, shirtless with only some bandages for modesty, as Ozawa-san hunches over her, brush in hand.

The process is slow, and a weird combination of ticklish and a little painful.

It will be worth it in the end, she reminds herself as Ozawa-san drags the chilly tip of a brush dripping with blood and ink over her breastbone.

This is also the scene that Kakashi walks in on, and it's only Sakura's quick reflexes that prevent Ozawa-san from being very literally murdered in cold-blood right there.

“Relax, Kakashi,” she scoffs, crossing her arms behind her head. “He’s helping me out with a permanent seal. I’d do it myself but we don’t have any good mirrors out here.”

Kakashi’s suspicious gaze remains on Ozawa-san, who is pointedly ignoring him, while he slumps into a chair next to the table that Sakura is splayed out on.

“Permanent seal?” he asks, sounding skeptical. “For what?”

Sakura hums, twitching as the brush ignites a ticklish sensation, before the rush of chakra that follows makes it sting. “Mm,” she responds. “It’s anti-friendly-fire for my own seals. That way I can’t be electrocuted or poisoned by them.”

“Huh.”

“She also built in an automatic defibrillator in case her heart *does* stop, because she’s both goddamn psychotic and a genius,” Ozawa-san pipes up. The brush never stops moving.

“Huh.”

Sakura smirks. “You’re getting the same one as soon as I work out the kinks with it,” she vows.

“Huh.”

Her eyes narrow. “I mean it, Kakashi.”

He arches the one brow at her. “Well, what if I don’t want it?”

Sakura rolls her eyes. “Tough shit, that’s not up to you.”

“Huh.”

In the end, just the one is not enough to satisfy Sakura.

It takes some tinkering, but after a few days, her anti-friendly-fire seal is pretty rock solid. When she’s standing over an Iwa-nin who is in the throes of a grand-mal seizure thanks to one of her electrocution tags, remaining utterly untouched, Sakura declares it a success.

That very night she corners Kakashi in a tent and tattoos its twin onto his chest. He is a quiet, somewhat bratty canvas, and she ventures into the field the next day feeling a bit more secure in his safety.

Kakashi makes the erroneous assumption that that will be that–but Sakura is far from finished. Now enlightened to the glut of opportunity that is permanent skin-seals, she cannot be stopped. Within a few days, Sakura is sporting weapons and supply storage seals on her arms and legs, allowing her to call forth kunai and tags from her very flesh.

There is some trial and error: shuriken exploding from her skin unbeckoned, nearly taking her eye out, or that one waterskin that got stuck halfway summoned from her left hip while

Sakura wailed unintelligibly until Minato came to her rescue.

This does nothing to deter her, for the record.

All of these efforts garner skepticism from Kakashi and the rest of Team Yellow Flash until Sakura summons a knife from her knee and hamstrings the Ame nin trying to snap Guruko's spine in half with a club.

Kakashi asks for a similar seal the next day.

Soon after, Sakura begins to develop a chakra-storage seal that will reside on her back—the largest expanse of uninterrupted skin she has—in order to bypass her meager reserves. She doesn't trust anyone else to work on it, so she bullies Kakashi into teaching her Shadow Clone Technique...which nearly fucking kills her the first time she tries it since it halves her chakra immediately.

She wakes to Kakashi hovering over her like an anxious shadow.

"Scoot," she bats away his fretting hands. "I need to try again."

Dear Mama and Papa,

Despite it all, I've managed to make some friends out here.

Miss you always.

Sakura

Rumors begin to pop up of a serial rapist from Iwa. A tokubetsu jounin named Tanagawa who makes no perceptible distinction between young and old, or even friend and foe—though he seems to have a slight preference for young girls from Kusa. According to the intel, he has red hair, yellow eyes, and wears a single teardrop earring made from an Ame sapphire.

Generally, the use of sexual assault as a method of fearmongering and war is frowned upon and not oft-used by shinobi. Why bother with something so pedestrian when you can call up earthquakes with your bare hands? It's dishonorable and limited in its efficacy.

It must be assumed, then, that Tanagawa is just a fucking despicable sack of shit and Iwa is letting him get away with it because they're desperate for manpower. They'll let a few brats from Kusa be collateral if it improves their chance of winning. This is war, after all.

"I heard that he's attacked his own allies, too," a female chunin behind Sakura in the mess line whispers. "Iwa doesn't care. He can rape anybody as long as he kills enough of us."

The chunin's companion makes a disgusted noise. "Iwa *scum,"* they hiss venomously. "A Konoha shinobi would *never.* "

Sakura very pointedly does not react, even as Mizuki's cruel face floats through her mind.

She keeps her head down. Everybody thinks they're the good guys, don't they?

Despite Sakura's successes with her sealing, frontline fighting is still not her strong suit. And unfortunately for her, Konoha is making what will allegedly be their final push into Iwa territory, with the ultimate goal of sacking Iwagakure and then the capitol. This means that Sakura is suddenly spending a *lot* of time on the battlefield.

Days like today are her least favorite.

Weapons sing through the air like lethal birds, and din of battle is occasionally whited out by the sound of an explosion. The chakra exhaustion must be getting to Kakashi because his shoulders are drooping and he's covering his sharingan with a palm, face contorted in agony. And Sakura doesn't even know where the enemy comes from, but suddenly he's in Kakashi's blindspot and there's four kunai hurtling towards her captain's back, and Sakura just leaps without thinking.

She throws her arms around his neck in a rather hysteric imitation of a hug, blocking one kunai with her own and taking the others in the meat of her forearms. The blades impact her flesh so hard they hit bone, which really fucking *hurts* but at least it's not Kakashi's cervical spine they're embedded in. Sakura's own kunai is launched at the enemy, but he dodges—unlucky for him, really, because the tag attached to the hilt detonates just as it flies by his head, quite literally blowing it right off of his shoulders.

Suddenly, there's another enemy bearing down on them, and Sakura gets shoved to the ground while Kakashi throws himself over her protectively.

The thoughtful gesture is ultimately, however, unnecessary because Bull leaps onto the man and rips his throat out with his teeth.

The arterial spray rains down on the two of them like a macabre shower. Even with Kakashi's body shielding her, a lot of it gets in Sakura's hair. *Gross.*

That's fine though, Sakura was going to hack it all off anyway because it's pitch black and shaggy instead of her natural silky pink. In the field, Sakura doesn't have pink hair because she *isn't* Sakura. She's Roach. And Roach is whatever she needs to be to survive, and most of the time, *easily distinguishable* is not that.

The man collapses like a puppet with its strings cut. Foaming slobber tinted red with blood drips from Bull's enormous teeth, and he licks them clean before dashing off to fell another victim.

Sakura watches him go, and another idea is born.

A week later, Sakura is sitting at the westmost commander's campfire and is about to take her first bite of her meal when Kakashi suddenly reaches over and snatches her chin.

“The hell are these?” he demands, pushing her top lip up to reveal her newly acquired fangs.

“A new tool,” Sakura responds rather primly around his fingers.

“Uh huh.” He’s frowning as he pulls his hand back. “What did you do? Grow them out and file them into points?”

Sakura scoffs. “No, that would compromise their integrity too much. They’re new. An Inuzuka vet owed me a favor.”

Sakura doesn’t see the look of burgeoning horror on Kakashi’s face because she’s busily digging into her bowl of vaguely food-like mush.

“It was a little tricky to revitalize the teeth because the dog died a few days ago—from a heart condition, it was really sad, he was a young dog—but I figured it would be trickier to try and regrow my own teeth in the right shape. I’m still a little iffy on total regeneration—”

“Wait, sorry,” Kakashi interrupts, not sounding apologetic in the slightest. “Are you telling me that you pulled out your perfectly healthy, human teeth and replaced them by implanting the teeth of a *dead dog?”*

Sakura glances up, caught off guard by the genuine disgust in Kakashi’s voice.

“What?” she asks, defensiveness making her hackles rise. “It’s not like I killed a dog for them. That would be fucking degenerate.”

In fact, Sakura helped the Inuzuka bury the dog after the extraction, and has visited the burial site since to express her gratitude for its protection.

Kakashi still looks repulsed, but Sakura isn’t going to be shamed. Her eyes narrow. “Do you have any idea how many times I’ve been grabbed by someone bigger than me, and the only defense I had left was to bite them?”

His expression immediately softens. “Ah. That’s…I hadn’t considered that.”

Sakura snorts. “Not surprising.” But she appreciates him acknowledging his shortsightedness.

She finishes her food slowly, trying to avoid biting her tongue and lips with the new additions and failing frequently. Kakashi just sighs the sigh of the eternally put-upon and wipes the blood from her chin like a doting mother cat.

Dear Mama and Papa,

I hope you two are okay. I haven’t heard back in a while.

Love you always.

Your daughter,

When it's just Sakura and Rin, sometimes Sakura feels a little bit like her old self. The *before* self. When it's just Sakura and Rin, they talk about frivolous stuff like hair and clothes and *boys* just as much as they discuss weapons and medical chakra . Keeping up with the conversation feels a bit like playing a part—Sakura's feet don't fit so well into these shoes anymore—but it's nice. Or at least Sakura *thinks* it feels nice. It's hard to tell these days.

"Do you think Kakashi is cute?" Sakura asks from where she's seated in Rin's lap. The older girl is carefully plaiting Sakura's hair into a braid. The sensation of having her scalp touched softly, of fingers combing gently through her hair…it might just be the best thing that's ever happened to Sakura. It's heaven.

There is silence in response, so Sakura turns slightly to see Rin, and bursts out in honest-to-god giggles at the expression of pure and utter revulsion on Rin's face.

"No," the medic replies firmly. "Ugh. Gross. *Ugh.* He's like a brother to me."

Sakura's giggles continue, the feeling is so foreign it nearly causes her to sneeze. "Are you *sure?"* she presses, voice sly.

Rin's response is to bop Sakura gently on the back of the head. "Yeah, I'm sure. Why, do *you* think he's cute?"

Sakura considers this, humming. "I don't actually know what he looks like." Also, she already wants to climb into his skin and wear his soul like a jacket. Thinking he's cute in addition to that might be a bit too much for anyone to handle.

"Fair point," Rin acquiesces. Then she asks, "What about me? Aren't I cute?"

Sakura turns again and is greeted with a faux-haughty look, Rin's lips contorted into an exaggerated pout and her eyes nearly crossed.

"I think you're beautiful," Sakura answers honestly.

Rin's expression becomes one of open shock before a shy smile graces it instead. "Well damn," she demurs. "You're too sweet."

Sakura shrugs. "Just being honest."

Rin laughs and returns to braiding Sakura's hair. "You're gonna be a real ladykiller one day," she muses. "Or maneater. Or both, I suppose."

Sakura leans into the ministrations, running her tongue over the sharp points of her borrowed fangs.

No, the irony is not lost on her.

Five months after Sakura is recruited to Team Yellow Flash, Squad 5C of the Combat & Field Assistance Division receives notices that Sergeant Mizuki has completed his medical leave and will be returning in a few days.

Sakura is standing at Kakashi's side when she learns this, like she always is these days, as icy dread bolts through her body. She's generally pretty fucking good at controlling her reactions, but it must show somewhere because Kakashi drops an elbow on her head and starts leaning on her like she's the countertop at a bar and not, you know—a person.

It's a weird gesture but they're in the middle of a briefing and Kakashi expresses his concern in bizarre ways at the best of times. As it is, Sakura interprets the move as, *hey, you good?*

Sakura keeps her gaze trained on her feet and begins to twiddle with the end of her braid. She isn't usually one for nervous tics, and assumes he interprets her anxiety correctly when he leans on her more heavily.

Let's talk later.

"Later" ends up being the next day because the rest of the afternoon is spent spilling blood and taking Iwa ground.

And that's just fine, because Sakura has some bugs to work out with her seals.

Turns out, in addition to figuring out how to store chakra, Sakura is clever enough to come up with an array that works like a transistor. She can feed chakra into one character terminal, and as it passes through the circuit of seals, the energy is amplified and can be applied in a multitude of ways. Unfortunately, she hasn't yet figured out a method to help her chakra coils handle huge increases in energy. Sakura found out the hard way (i.e. almost blowing her arm off) that her coils are pretty underdeveloped, and the only way to really fix that is through repeatedly and consistently expending large amounts of chakra.

In a word: training.

And unfortunately, patience is not one of Sakura's strong suits these days, so she gets creative. Linking the transistor output seals to her weapons storage is a decent way to engage those coils consistently. It also really adds some *oomph* to her steelplay—just the other day, Sakura ejected a kunai out of her wrist with enough speed to fucking decapitate the Ame nin unlucky to be nearby. She is also in the process of engineering some touch-based electrocution seals, which is really putting that original anti-friendly-fire seal through its paces.

Well, not that she has the original anymore. Sakura's modified Mystic Palm is also a great way to redo seals; she can just slough off wide swaths of skin and replace them immediately, a fresh canvas. If her skin looks a little patchwork because of it, it's barely noticeable amongst the ink that now covers nearly every centimeter anyway. The only skin that remains untouched is her face, for both the reason of lingering vanity and that shooting weapons out of her face just sketches Sakura out. Even she has limits.

As it is, generating enough electricity to kill a fully grown adult is outside Sakura's range of capabilities; she's got the juice for it, but an output that large would cook her coils and render her useless for days. However, she *can* handle voltages high enough to stun, which allows for easier stabbing, and if she's able to touch their head can induce severe seizures. With her current natural capacity combined with the transistor array, Sakura can fire off about five of these per day and still have some chakra left over to stockpile in the storage seal.

An early trial of this popped the man's skull like a grape and nearly amputated Sakura's hand in the process, garnering her yet another nickname: Headsplitter.

Roach, Headsplitter, Pinky, Maneater, Fish. Kiddo. Brat. She's Konoha scum and its best and brightest. A gutless weakling and a dogged killer. None of it matters to her. She is whatever she needs to be.

"Hey."

Sakura blinks, brought out of her thoughts by a palm dropping onto her head. Her eyes are dry from staring into the fire pit for so long. She turns to find Kakashi, of course. Anyone else, save Rin, would lose that hand.

"I think this could use a tune up," Kakashi says, tapping his heart with a thumb, and thus presumably indicating his anti-friendly-fire seal. "Think you could spare a minute?"

Sakura gives him a small, genuine smile. "For you? Always."

Ten minutes and a few ironclad silencing seals slapped to the tent posts later, Sakura sits down onto the stump across from Kakashi's cot.

"C'mon then," she waves him over as she drags the stump closer to the side of the bed. "You know the drill."

He hovers by the tent flap, looking ready to bolt. "That was clearly just a diversion," he hedges. "This seal is rock solid, no revisions necessary."

Sakura just rolls her eyes. "Lie down, you big baby. You know it doesn't hurt anymore."

The jounin sighs, slowly trudging towards the cot with the same demeanor one might have if they were facing the gallows. "I know," he allows, voice amusingly whiny. "It's just so gross and weird when you peel huge pieces of my skin off."

Sakura smiles. "Gross and weird and *satisfying* ," she corrects. "Now chop, chop. This won't take five minutes."

No, it takes about fifteen, including the indeed *very* satisfying act of peeling off a swatch of skin like it's an old bandaid, and reapplying the new and improved seal.

Only once Sakura has inspected it multiple times for mistakes and tests it once with a jolt of her own current does she allow Kakashi to put his shirt back on.

“Alright, *now* can we talk about whatever it is that was bugging you yesterday?” Kakashi says, half of the question muffled by his shirt passing over his head. “Seems like it has something to do with that old sergeant of yours, Masaki or whatever.”

“Mizuki,” Sakura corrects compulsively. “It is. I…need to tell you about something. That he did.”

Sakura swallows, feeling anxiety slip an icy coil around her lungs, preventing her from drawing a full breath. Her pulse pounds in her neck even though she’s sitting perfectly still.

“...to me.”

That gets Kakashi’s attention very quickly, and he resumes his spot before her on the cot, this time leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees.

“What happened?” he asks, voice carefully devoid of any emotion.

And with halting, hesitant words, Sakura recounts the invitation to Mizuki’s tent, his oddly amicable behavior, the silencing seals, the way he glanced meaningfully at his cot…it happened over a year ago but is clear as day in her mind.

“He offered some sort of…exchange,” she mutters. “Like if I f-fucked him he would get me better food or something.”

There is silence, then Kakashi asks, “Are you sure?”

It’s like an anvil in Sakura’s chest, yanking her lungs down through her guts and stealing her breath. *Are you sure?*

After everything they’ve been through, and Kakashi doesn’t fucking believe her.

Are you sure? Are you sure? Areyoussureareyousureareyousu

The walls slam down around Sakura’s mind, each one like a bomb going off in her skull. Her heart, it *hurts,* so she grasps it and squeezes squeezes *squeezes* until it stops making those horrible wounded noises and stuffs it in that fucking box and buries it deep deep *deep* never to be fucking found again.

Something about this must show on her face because Kakashi’s eye widens. “Fuck, that sounded wrong,” he says, an edge of real panic in his voice. “I believe you, I promise I do, I just asked because accusing a superior officer of—”

Sakura stands. “I’m going back to my tent,” she says tonelessly. White noise is beginning to blot out most sounds.

“Sakura, I’m sorry,” Kakashi tries, following her. “Please, listen to me. That came out wrong. I promise that I believe you.”

Sakura doesn’t look at him and rips off the silencing tags, burning them to ash with a burst of chakra. The seals on her back thrum in time with her rabbit-quick heart, a desperate rhythm

that chants *run run run* in the back of her brain.

She leaves and he doesn't stop her.

A day later, Mizuki arrives back at camp. Sakura quells the rage that bubbles up when she sees his pale, revolting face, corners him and demands to be sent to the squad making the frontline push. No more T&D, no more CFA, no more Team Yellow Flash. Usually such a request would be impossible for a member of the CFA, but Sakura is certain that Mizuki has some weasley ways of achieving it—not to mention the proper motivation.

Mizuki eyes her warily, waiting for a catch. "Why?" he asks, clearly having heard of her recent cushier appointments.

"I just wanna kill as many of those dirtfuckers as possible before the war ends," she lies.

And finally, hopefully, maybe die in the process. That part is left unsaid.

He studies her for a moment, then shrugs. "Have it your way, Roach. You can ship out tomorrow."

Sakura leaves before dawn and does not see any member of Team Yellow Flash again until the war is over.

Time gets slippery. Out here, Sakura spends more time as Roach than not and Roach doesn't really pay attention to things like that.

Roach eats, shits, kills, and sleeps. Wash, rinse, repeat.

Roach doesn't think about things like silver-haired friends or unanswered letters. Roach just scuttles about the battlefield, slashing a throat here, splitting a skull there. Knives bleed from Roach's skin like fungus blooming on a mother stump. She molts her flesh and replaces it anew, every iteration more cobwebbed with dark spirals of ink.

Somehow, Roach keeps surviving.

Those times that Sakura does come back, her campmates avoid her anyway. Their apparent revulsion gets Sakura her own tent, completely unheard of for someone of her rank, which is just fine with her. She wonders absently how wide the berth would become if they knew the tattoos on her back could leave her nothing but a cloud of bloody vapor and this camp a crater half a kilometer wide.

Eat, shit, kill, sleep.

No one from Team Yellow Flash attempts to visit her or bring her back.

Sakura tries and fails to convince herself this does not hurt, so Roach takes over and the pain goes away. Roach only thinks in sounds and smells and vibrations—the shiver in the grass, the thrum of chakra, the peppery copper tang of blood and burning. Roach calculates the power output necessary to sever the spine of this enemy or the trajectory required to pierce

the heart of that one. Roach wins and kills and kills and wins and Sakura sleeps at night dreaming of the screams of people whose names she will never learn.

“D-d-*demon!”*

Roach blinks, head tilting curiously to one side. The Iwa nin before her is belly-crawling away frantically, because one of her traps blew off most of one leg and half of the other. She trails after him, a simple genjutsu melting her in and out of the mooncast shadows like a slithery, dark specter.

He continues his frantic scramble, leaving a bloody trail behind him like a gory snail. Neither Roach nor Sakura are one to drag out their kills, so Roach aims a seal-loaded kunai at his cervical spine, and—

Wait.

Something glimmers near his jaw, something blue. Roach steps closer to get a better look. It’s an earring, a slender teardrop that dangles from his lobe. Rather inappropriate for a shinobi during wartime. It also beckons forth a certain memory, one that draws Sakura out from the depths of her own mind.

“Tanagawa?” Sakura asks. His eyes are yellow and his hair appears to be red—though he’s so soaked with his own blood, and in the blue light of the moon, it’s a little hard to tell.

He freezes, glancing over his shoulder at her. “Wh-why do you know my name?” he demands fearfully, and begins his escape attempt with renewed vigor.

Sakura merely places one foot on the bloody stump of his left leg and bears down with some chakra. He squeals like a stuck pig and flails, fingernails ripping as he tears at the earth for purchase.

So this is Tanagawa, the serial rapist and generally despicable piece of Iwa dogshit.

“Please, please don’t kill me, *please!”*

Sakura looks at him, at his pitiful wails and the tears and snot running down his face. He’s skinny, almost ratlike. If Sakura saw him on the street, she might clock him for an administrative worker, or somebody’s weird, sickly uncle.

And yet. And *yet.*

This man has caused pain and terror beyond comprehension for so many girls and women. There are people out there who will never feel safe or clean or whole again because of him. For those who do recover it will be a long and difficult process. Those who died at his hand did so violated and terrified. All because this one, pathetic, vile little worm decided that he was entitled to causing that pain.

Sakura lifts her foot, allowing him to lurch forward, then she melts into the shadows with her genjutsu.

He freezes again, head whipping back and forth as he tries to sight her. “Wh-what are you doing?!” he demands, digging a kunai out of his hip pouch. “Show yourself, demon!”

Sakura allows the genjutsu to do the work—it rustles the leaves in his peripheral vision, makes the shadows shiver and twitch. In reality, she merely walks around him, but he looks straight through her. Eventually, she comes to stand before his head, and drops into a crouch. Right before she dispels the illusion, Sakura changes her eyes to solid black—sclera and all—and uses chakra to activate her salivary glands. Her hair, long and black, descends over her shoulders in oily waves.

“Boo,” she whispers, releasing the genjutsu with a pulse of chakra.

Tanagawa shrieks, and tries to scramble upwards on instinct. The fact that he’s missing about seventy percent of his legs makes this effort futile, and he collapses back to the ground with a gasp.

Sakura laughs, tongue lolling out of her mouth and foaming drool dripping from her fangs. “Oh?” she coos. “Are you afraid, Tanagawa?” Then she vanishes again, hidden by her illusion.

She lets him crawl several meters this time, following at a more sedate pace.

The illusion is dispelled when Sakura kicks him harshly in the abdomen, hard enough that he vomits. She trails a hand down his back as he coughs, then disappears into the shadows again.

And truly, she should just kill the fucker. This kind of cruelty isn’t really her style.

But Sakura can’t help but toy with him, finding a rageful exultation in his weeping cries. She’s drunk on the power of being the hunter, for once, instead of the hunted.

He’s crying now. Deep, wet, gasping sobs as he begs for mercy, for his mother, for his life. Sakura allows it, allows him to plead and snivel at her feet as she contemplates just how to finally kill him.

And really, his legs are already well on their way to doing it for her. Anything she does will just be speeding the process along.

Ultimately, she grabs his head mid-garbled cry, cradling his face like one might a lover, and activates the seals on her arms and back. Electricity, the same thing that destroyed those fucking silencing tags in that fucking tent over a year ago, seems like the fitting tool.

She starts with low voltage, then slowly cranks it up.

Tanagawa’s brain boils in his skull like a poached egg, and Sakura commits the sound of the crackling flesh and splintering bone to memory. Mizuki might never see justice for what he tried to do to her—and what he’s probably succeeded in doing to others—but she can have this. This will have to be enough.

He collapses to the ground, limp and smoking.

On a whim, Sakura reaches down and yanks the sapphire teardrop from his ear, holding it close for inspection. To her surprise, the blue gem has turned green, the new jade-like shade a dead ringer for her own irises. Huh. Not a sapphire at all, then, and rather some form of copper crystal that turns green when dehydrated.

She smiles, wipes it clean on her fatigues, and pushes the hooked post through her earlobe. It isn't pierced, but Sakura's Mystic Palm takes care of that.

Sakura's sleep that night is dreamless.

Dear Mama and Papa,

I did something good today.

Sakura

Sakura's frontline division is sent to capture a town on the outskirts of Iwagakure as a final message to the Tsuchikage: surrender now, or we'll sack the Hidden Village, too.

Their orders are to absolutely not kill *any* civilians, with the only exception being those who have clearly taken up arms and are fighting for the Village. Non-combatants are to be subdued with as little violence as possible, and those who surrender will be wardens of Konoha.

Honestly, it feels a bit like a breath of fresh air for Sakura. It's also pretty far outside her current wheelhouse, which mostly consists of dashing around and electrocuting people. She's willing to rise to the challenge, though. Especially if it means less civilian casualties.

Put an Iwa shinobi in front of her and Sakura will gut them like a fish without blinking, but civilians are innocents as far as she's concerned. They never agreed to the violent politics of shinobi life and should be left out of it.

And Sakura has caused enough collateral for a fucking lifetime.

"G-get away from me!"

The can of food bounces off of Sakura's forehead with a nigh-comical *clunk,* but she barely notices. Instead, she's focused on approaching the elderly woman in the shed with a slow and controlled advance, hands raised to soothe. Two additional members of Sakura's squad, whose names she will never bother to learn, follow rather lackadaisically behind.

"I'm not going to hurt you," she promises. "Anyone in this town that surrenders will be under Konoha's protection."

"You think I believe that?!" the woman spits, backing up into the wall behind her. She casts about frantically, presumably for something to protect herself with, before snatching up an old, rusty rake from a wooden rack.

“Stay away from me,” she growls shakily.

Sakura winces. The woman must be pushing eighty, is probably a grandmother, and was likely minding her own business in her family home when Sakura’s unit attacked completely unprovoked. This woman has watched in terror as her country is weakened slowly but surely by Konoha, and now finally the wolves have arrived on her doorstep. Of course she’s not going to surrender easily.

Sakura takes another step and the woman swipes at her with the rake, though she’s much too far away for it to risk making any contact.

“Ope,” pipes up Sakura’s squadmate. “This civilian has taken up arms. Looks like we’re cleared to use lethal force.”

The woman pales and Sakura balks. *“What?* It’s just a fucking rake—”

Thunk.

The woman crumples, a kunai sunken down to the hilt in her throat. She convulses weakly before growing still.

Sakura just stares, before moving her disbelieving gaze to her fellow Konoha shinobi.

“What,” she breathes, “The *fuck* was that?”

The one who threw the kunai scoffs. “What’s your problem? Thought you came out here to kill lotsa dirtfuckers?”

The other one rolls his eyes. “Bet you anything this psycho bitch was hoping to swoop in at the last minute and claim the glory when we take Iwagakure.”

Sakura just continues to stare, stunned silent with a rage so white-hot, so deeply consuming that she fears that if she even *breathes* the spell of motionlessness will break and she will slaughter both of the men in front of her.

They leave the shed with dual expressions of cruel disdain, and one even spits at Sakura’s feet as they exit. Sakura’s gaze follows them out, before it returns to the dead elderly woman.

Mechanically, Sakura approaches her. Blood is pooling rapidly, lapping at the sole of Sakura’s sandals. Roach doesn’t usually wear them (too much interference) and right now Sakura is grateful to have that one barrier between her and the river of red.

With a trembling hand, Sakura reaches out and closes the woman’s eyes. They’re green, not entirely unlike her own. The woman’s skin is crepey under Sakura’s fingers, wisened and yielding with age, and already cooling to the touch. She has deep laugh lines and distinct crows-feet, so Sakura doesn’t have to work hard to imagine this fiery woman in an uproarious belly-laugh.

But now she’s dead.

How many civilians have those two murdered in cold blood? Would they have raped this woman, if she was younger, more palatable?

Then Sakura thinks of all of the things *she* has done—acts committed in the name of Konoha—and wonders if she even has a leg to stand on.

Sakura has poisoned water supplies and blown up field hospitals. Storehouses of precious food have turned to ash from her efforts. Plenty of the Iwa shinobi she has killed have been her age, maybe even younger.

A sharp pain lances through Sakura's skull, and she hunches over gasping.

The sight of the woman before her swims, and suddenly it's Sakura lying there, throat torn out and alone, forgotten in the back of a dusty shed.

She scrambles backwards and heaves up her half-digested breakfast rations. Then there is silence, broken only by the sound of her desperate wheezing breaths.

Abruptly, deep shame washes over Sakura like a boiling wave, turning her stomach again. Is she only capable of feeling horror when it's her own death staring back at her? But the lives of countless others are just another day's work.

Sakura's breath quickens as the vice of rage and shame tightens around her lungs. She can't get enough air. The pain in her head returns, and it feels like something trapped in her skull is trying desperately to fight its way out.

The box.

The box, Sakura's box that she buried and abandoned a year ago, is wrenched to the surface of her mind, ripping through layer after layer of carefully applied avoidance, and spills open.

She can't—

She can't—

It's like every moment of terror and pain and homesickness and grief from the last fourteen months comes crashing into her all at once.

please, I want to go home, I want my mama, please let me leave pleasepleaseplease

please

Sakura finds herself stumbling outside, blinking in the blinding sunlight. The shock of it is grounding, and then a kunai nearly takes her ear off, causing her to jerk back with a gasp.

The quiet town street is quiet no more, now a shrieking din of clashing metal and furious shouts. Reinforcements from Iwa have arrived, which means the real fight begins now.

Still gasping, Sakura latches onto the familiarity of the sounds of battle. This. She knows this.

Desperate for reprieve, Sakura tries to sink into that safe, dark space in her mind, the place she goes when Roach takes over.

But she can't. Her faculties remain stubbornly online. The crunch of gravel underfoot is like fireworks, and the smell of wet, early spring air and the promise of rain is heavy in her nose.

Roach isn't there anymore.

But…no, that's not quite right. Roach, pieces of her, have crashed into Sakura and fused, like ill-fitting puzzle pieces forcefully assembled. They've been joined into one hideous, terrified monster.

Sakura gazes out into the battlefield, and without sparing another second to think about it, locates the biggest, meanest, strongest-looking shinobi and runs straight at her.

It is worth noting that one of the major contributing factors to Sakura's continued survival is that Roach only picks fights she can win. Roach doesn't fight for ego or glory, she fights to live another day—which means she avoids people who will clearly fucking crush her.

People like the woman she's sprinting at right now.

Sakura activates her seals as she dashes forth, the energy growing and amplifying with every beat of her heart. The Iwa nin, however, wastes no time in sending a wave of rocky pillars at Sakura, which jettison out of the ground and try their damndest to pierce through her gut. Sakura nimbly hops across the pillars like it's a schoolyard game, utilizing the extra airtime to charge up the most powerful blast of electricity she can handle and bring her fist down onto the woman's head.

However, the Iwa nin's skin has bloated and hardened, so much so that she more closely resembles a stone golem than a human. Some sort of stone armor technique, it looks like. Sakura will have to get through it in order to deal any real damage.

As it is, Sakura's strongest blow merely skitters off of the woman's arms, which have been lifted above her skull to block. Then she simply bats Sakura away like she's an errant bug.

As she flies backwards, Sakura releases a storm of steel from her shins and feet, every shuriken and kunai propelled by seal-chakra to superhuman speeds. Yet once again, the Iwa nin all but ignores the assault.

Again, Sakura rushes her, this time forcing more chakra than she should into her arms.

Again, she is knocked back.

The third time, Sakura doubles the amount of chakra in her blast, even though her arms feel like they're on fire and won't stop twitching erratically.

The fourth time, she doubles it *again,* even though her tank is beginning to run a little low and blood is seeping out of the pores on her arms like she's sweating it.

For the fifth attempt she tries weapons again, launching a barrage of shuriken extensive enough to run out the rest of the Iwa shinobi's patience. Consequently, Sakura is snatched up in two massive, stony hands and slammed into the ground, wherein the shinobi begins to both crush and strangle her.

I can't breath.

The burning in her lungs suddenly thrusts Sakura back into that godforsaken reservoir in Kusa, igniting a panic so animal that it blots out most of her higher function. As her vision grows dark around the edges, Sakura grips the woman's giant shoulders and sends off blast after blast of electricity with every shred of her power.

The armor of stone begins to crack and chip, revealing precious skin beneath. Another blast, strong enough that Sakura annihilates her own left pinky and the seals have completely burned through her shirt, unearths a patch of skin throbbing with a pulse. On pure instinct, Sakura grips hard and yanks, taking advantage of gravity and the woman's heavy, unwieldy form.

The Iwa nin collapses on top of her, and Sakura's fangs sink into the pulsating softness.

Blood, coppery and boiling, spills into Sakura's mouth with a gush, choking her further. She releases immediately, turning away from the wound as more blood gets in her eyes.

Fuck.

The Iwa shinobi sucks in a pained gasp, but the air moves with a gurgle through the hole in her throat rather than her mouth. Sakura watches in horror as she lurches backwards, rapidly shrinking hands clamping onto her neck in a desperate attempt to staunch the rush of blood.

"No," Sakura whispers, reaching towards her haltingly. "No, *no."*

The woman crumples and Sakura scrambles after her. "No, you were supposed to—supposed __"

Then the light is gone from the Iwa shinobi's eyes and she falls limp. Sakura tries to clutch at her but her arms won't cooperate and instead hang like dead-weights from her shoulders.

For several long seconds, Sakura just breathes.

Crack-crack-boom!

A flash of light, chased by a riotous crash.

Lightning.

The rain that follows is instantaneous and torrential. Within moments, Sakura is soaked to the bone. The icy splatter on her overheated skin feels like thousands of needles, and Sakura realizes with a start that she's practically naked. Her clothes, shredded and burned away by her seals, hang in limp, wet tatters from her body.

The next thing she notices is the quiet.

Beyond the sound of rainfall, there is nothing. No shouts, no steel.

No battle.

Slowly, Sakura looks around. Amongst the rubble and bodies she can see shinobi still standing, all of them sporting the greens and blues of Konoha.

She blinks. It would appear that the only remaining Iwa shinobi are the dead ones. Suddenly, there is movement, and the sparse sea of soldiers parts to reveal someone running. They're dressed like a messenger-nin.

Cracka-crack-crack-boom!

Another strike and louder this time. It drowns out the words of the messenger, though he is bellowing with all of his might.

"—kage is dead!"

Her heart stops.

"The tsuchikage is dead! Iwa has surrendered!"

The world stops.

A beat of silence, and then utter elation erupts around Sakura. Konoha shinobi, bleeding and wartorn, shout and crow and cry with pure relief and joy.

"It's over!"

"The war is over!"

Sakura remains kneeling, frozen other than her trembling.

Her gaze drops to her hands, which rest in the dirt beside her knees. The pounding rain has already washed away the worst of the blood and grime, uninhibited by fabric, and the skin left behind is mostly unmarred save for the whorls of ink. Sakura's hair, long enough to pool on the ground, lightens as it is cleansed. With considerable effort Sakura manages to pick up a lock of hair, pinching it between two fingers that she can see but cannot feel.

It's a mottled gray.

She can make it pink for good now, she supposes. The lock turns reddish with a weak pulse of chakra, except…it's wrong.

Frowning, Sakura tries again.

No, that shade isn't right either.

But.

She can't—

Wrong, still wrong.

Sakura can't remember the color of her own hair anymore.

Numbly, she drops the strand, her arm returning to its limp dangle in the dirt.

A shaky inhale.

Her eyes burn.

Her lip trembles.

Then, for the first time since the war began, Sakura begins to cry. What start as quiet sniffles quickly swell into bellowing sobs.

The rain mixes with her tears and Sakura

weeps

and weeps

and *weeps.*

Iwa Proclamation of Surrender

We, the undersigned, acting by authority of the Tsuchikage and Iwagakure Council, hereby accept the provisions set forth in the declaration issued by the Hokage and Konohagakure Council, and surrender unconditionally to Konohagakure and its declared allies.

We hereby command all Iwa forces and forces under Iwa control to cease hostilities forthwith and to preserve life and property, and to comply with all commands and requirements imposed by Konogakure and allies.

We hereby command…

Sakura spends a week and a half in a medically-induced chakra exhaustion coma, and when she finally wakes up, Mizuki has been taken into custody and there's a new hokage.

The attendant at her bedside—an actual *bed* in a *hospital* because somebody dragged Sakura's sorry ass all the way home to Konoha without her fucking noticing—a mousy looking man in his forties is talking a far too fast for Sakura to comprehend, given how groggy and disoriented she is.

Konoha. She's back in Konoha.

Sakura is *home.*

“Where are my parents,” is the first coherent sentence she manages. The bedsheets are crispy and clean and everything is so *white* it’s fucking blinding. There are beeps of machines and the smell of antiseptic because she’s in a real hospital. A real one. In Konoha, because she’s home. What the fuck.

These thoughts continue in their circular manner until the attendant *hem-hems* a polite cough, busily flipping through a stack of papers. He apparently finds what he’s looking for, because he *hem-hems* again and says, “Haruno-san and Haruno-san moved to eastern Fire country approximately four months ago. They will be notified of your return immediately and you may rendezvous with them at your leisure.”

Sakura blinks slowly, digesting that. It explains why the letters stopped. Better than them being dead, she supposes.

“Now, as I was saying, former-sergeant Mizuki will remain detained until the punishment for his crimes has been determined. Back to the other matter: it is quite fortunate that you awoke, since the swearing-in ceremony is today and the Hokage-sama would like to honor a select few soldiers for their dedicated service, one of whom is *you,* so we’ll need to get you tidied up—”

“Wait,” Sakura cuts him off, because none of that second bit sounds good at all. “Who is Hokage?”

The man’s expression becomes dour. “The *Yon*daime-sama, obviously.”

Sakura rolls her eyes. “I can fucking count, thank you. I asked *who.”*

“Why, Namikaze Minato, of course,” he responds, sounding deeply offended. “Sandaime-sama’s final request was to nominate him, before he passed away peacefully of natural causes.”

That sends Sakura’s brows shooting into her hairline. Iwa surrenders because their Tsuchikage commits suicide, ushering in a new era between the two villages, and then the Hokage just…dies of old age? And a favored hero of wartime who just happens to have no known major clan affiliations succeeds him?

Every lick of it is fishy, but Sakura keeps that opinion to herself. Being executed for treason this late in the game would just be fucking lame.

Besides, if Minato is hokage, she’s got some bargaining power.

“Bring me to him,” she commands the attendant. “Now.”

Apparently one cannot meet with the Hokage whilst wearing a backless hospital gown (even if he hasn’t been officially sworn in yet), so they force Sakura into the stiffest set of Konoha fatigues on the planet before allowing her into his office. The vest that comes with them looks suspiciously more like a real chuunin vest rather than the standard wartime issue, and it fits her extremely well, which sends uncomfortable prickles under Sakura’s skin.

“Haruno-san,” he greets warmly, and the sight of his familiar yellow hair and the memories it dredges up nearly makes Sakura want to vomit. “I’m so glad that you’re alright, and awake. Hopefully Yoshida-san here has filled you in on the plans for today?”

What Sakura *wants* to say is *is Kakashi alive, is he okay, will he forgive me* but what she *needs* to say is, “Please don’t promote me,” and that’s what comes out of her mouth.

Minato—Yondaime-sama—blinks, head cocking curiously to one side. “Can you explain, Haruno-san? I would like to honor the enormous sacrifices you made throughout the war for this village.”

And make yourself look better to gain favor with your new constituents, she does not say.

Sakura swallows. “You really wanna make it up to me?” she asks, fists clenching anxiously at her sides. The seals on her back and arms prickle.

He nods.

“Then don’t promote me,” she says. “Let me be a genin and do stupid D-ranks with some team of idiots before I get sent back into the meat-grinder.” She winces a little on the last word, remembering the newly widened chasm between their ranks.

The Yondaime nods, and to Sakura’s relief he seems to be genuinely considering the idea. “Your mission records would need to be sealed, then, until you’re promoted or turn eighteen.”

Sakura is already mirroring the nod, though with a smidgen more franticness. “That’s fine, good. I want that.”

Minato hums, evidently in deep thought, before a smile suddenly curls his lips. “You know…” he says slowly, with the demeanor of someone who was just struck by a very clever idea. “I might have *just* the team for you.”

Three days later, Sakura is making her way to the bridge where she has been instructed to meet her team, when she spots two distinctly-colored figures at the rendezvous point.

One is blue and one is orange.

No *fucking* way.

Sakura slows her pace, stuffing her hands into the pocket over her oversized-hoodie-turned-dress. The orange is a dead-giveaway because no other shinobi on this planet would wear such a garish color, and the particular shade of blue tickles some deep, well-worn pathway in her brain. Without a doubt, the people standing on the bridge—and thus, her new teammates—are Namikaze Naruto and Uchiha Sasuke.

Sakura’s mind races. What fucking game is Minato playing, putting her on a team with his own son and a Uchiha heir? It makes absolutely zero sense, except—except it fucking does.

Sakura stops dead in her tracks. No fucking *wonder* Minato had the stupid, pleased little smile on his face when he mentioned having a team for her.

He gets a built-in bodyguard for two of the most important children in Konoha while making it *appear* like there's no special appointments being made. The village looks stronger, while he gets to sleep easier. And more than that, because Sakura's records are sealed, no one will know how many fucked up things she did in the name of the village, making his incoming legacy cleaner already. Last but not least, their commander will have an easy choice if a sacrifice has to be made. Sakura is a professional meat-shield, after all.

It's win-win-fucking- *win* for Namikaze Minato.

In fact, it's so ridiculously, absurdly favorable for him that Sakura nearly turns around and heads back to demand a promotion purely on principle. It's just not fucking *fair*.

Ultimately, however, she does start walking again…towards the bridge. Her approach is noticed quickly by both, and Naruto bounds up to her with obvious excitement while Sasuke hangs back, regarding her cautiously.

"You must be our new teammate, hi!" he greets, immediately invading Sakura's personal space. It is only her ironclad self-control that spares him a knife to the kidney.

"I'm Naruto, and the bastard here is Sasuke. What's your—*hey,* wait a minute!" Naruto stops, head cocking to the side just like Minato.

Sakura waits, observing him quietly.

"Aren't you…aren't you Sakura-chan?!" Naruto gasps, pointing at her with a finger. "What the heck! It's definitely Sakura-chan! From class!"

The blond turns to Sasuke, elbowing him in the gut. "Isn't it, bastard? It totally is!"

Sasuke grunts at the impact but otherwise ignores Naruto. "Who are you?" he demands instead, turning his attention to Sakura.

"Naruto's right," she says slowly, and lowers her hood. "We used to be in the academy together."

Sasuke's eyes narrow. "You seem…different," he accuses, stepping back. He looks her up and down, gaze snagging on her heavily tattooed legs that peek out from under the hoodie. Her spandex shorts stop just above the knee, so there's plenty of ink visible.

Ain't that the truth. A year ago, such scrutiny from the boy would have made her blush. Sakura almost cracks a smile.

"Yeah, yeah!" Naruto agrees, sidling up to Sasuke. "Your hair is wrong! Or like, different than I remember!"

Her amusement vanishes in a snap. "Yeah, well," she shrugs. "I went undercover a lot. Can't seem to get the color right, now that I'm back."

Naruto nods, expression serious, while Sasuke looks extremely doubtful. Sakura has found that it's easier, sometimes, to hide the truth by telling it. She seems to have half-succeeded, here.

Naruto *hmms* and looks around, before apparently spotting something, and dashes off.

Sakura and Sasuke watch in silence as Naruto scales a nearby cherry tree, scrambling up the branches like a gigantic, neon squirrel. It's still too early for cherry blossoms, so the tree is mostly leaves, but Naruto seems to be gunning for a cluster of early-bloomers at the very top. He crows with success when he snatches them, and then promptly plummets to the ground with a comical *thunk.*

Apparently undeterred, Naruto trots back over to Sakura and holds out the handful of twigs like it's a grand bouquet.

"Here ya go!" he chirps, waving the blossoms at her. "The right color!"

Sakura blinks, stunned. "Oh," she finally says, taking the handful of flowers. Most of them are still buds, yet to open.

It *is* the right color, she realizes. With a pulse of chakra, her waist-length hair matches it perfectly.

Naruto makes an impressed, surprised noise while Sasuke says, *"You* know Chameleon Technique?"

Sakura can't even bring herself to be sarcastic or biting, because her hair is finally the right fucking color and that alone is bringing her more relief than even being back inside Konoha's walls.

Because maybe, even if parts of her get lost…maybe there are ways of finding them again.

"I do," she answers eventually.

"I want to meet whoever invented that technique," Sasuke admits, a little awkwardly. A conversational olive branch, perhaps.

Sakura looks up at him. "Why?"

His gaze slides away. "To thank them," he mutters, cheeks pinking. "It saved the lives of many of my family members, because they could conceal their eyes from bloodline-thieves."

Warmth pools in Sakura's belly, and she offers him a small smile. "Well, I hope you tell them that some day," she says quietly. "I bet it would mean a lot."

Sasuke grunts. "Hm."

A companionable silence descends, but Sakura doesn't get to enjoy it for long before the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

A familiar chakra, one that she would know *anywhere* tickles her senses. Sakura whips around to find—

"Yo," Kakashi greets, hands stuffed into the pockets of his pants and a twinkle in his visible eye. "You must be my new students."

The last words have barely left Kakashi's mouth when Sakura leaps at him, snatching him in a full-body embrace and clinging tight enough to strangle a weaker man.

He catches her readily and easily, one arm wrapping around her back and the other supporting her bum as she coils her legs around his waist like a vice. He's here, he's alive, he's all dressed up in those dorky jounin blues like some kind of real ninja, and he's *her teacher.* Kakashi is *hers* again.

Mine, mine, mine, the creature trills. *Mine again!*

"You look so dumb in this outfit," Sakura sobs a little nonsensically, burying her face in his neck. "And I'm never gonna call you sensei, you fucking asshole."

Kakashi just hums, holding her tight and running a soothing hand up and down her back. "It's good to see you too," he returns, affection clear as day in his voice.

Noises of confusion emanate from behind the pair.

"Kaka-aniki?" Naruto asks, eyes huge. *"You're* our sensei?!"

Sakura leans away from Kakashi a fraction, enough to wipe her runny nose on his flak vest. "You know these two?" she asks, but the puzzle pieces are already starting to come together, given that Kakashi is on Team Yellow Flash. Of course he knows them.

"Since they were squalling infants," Kakashi responds, loosening his hold on Sakura slightly. When she only tightens her grip, he sighs and shifts her to a more stable position. The beast in Sakura's chest purrs and purrs.

"How long have you been back?" Sasuke demands, sounding put out. "We haven't seen you in over a year."

"A little while," Kakashi answers cryptically. "Sorry I didn't come say hi earlier, I had some business to attend to."

He squeezes Sakura a little on the word *business* and suddenly she remembers the words *Mizuki, detained, crimes,* and *punishment.*

Oh. *Oh.* Sakura squeezes him back hard, hoping to convey her gratitude. They'll have to talk more later.

"Come along now, boys," Kakashi beckons, hefting Sakura a bit before heading towards a nearby training ground. "It's time for some icebreakers."

Sakura watches with her chin hooked over Kakashi's shoulder as the boys follow, like two spiky-haired little ducklings.

"We all know each other already," Naruto protests. "Tell us about the war, Kaka-aniki! Didja fight lots?!"

Sakura doesn't think she's ever heard the word *war* said in such a sunny tone.

"True, but it's tradition," Kakashi responds lightly, then sits down under a nice, shady tree and begins to extract himself from Sakura's octopus grip.

Sakura harrumphs but allows it, though she immediately glues herself to his side, lifting his arm and draping it over her shoulder with propriety. Naruto throws himself over Kakashi's outstretched legs, and even Sasuke sort of joins the dogpile by sitting close enough that his shoulder brushes Kakashi's.

He's mine!

Sakura bristles at the physical familiarity, possessiveness flaming hot and sudden in her gut. Then an icy wave of anxiety crashes over her, as the reality of Kakashi's shared history with the boys truly sinks in. He's known them since they were small, Naruto is his teacher's son and Sasuke has the sharingan like he does. Kakashi cares for them in a way he'll probably *never* care for her. Inevitably, Sakura is going to become an afterthought.

She's going to become disposable. *Again.*

Dread seeps into Sakura's bones as she glares at where Naruto is reclined on Kakashi's legs, and then at Sasuke's close proximity. They're going to take him from her. It's just a matter of time.

The jealousy and pain must show on her face, because Kakashi looks at her with a curious expression. Then, something like recognition flits through his eye, and Sakura averts her gaze.

"Hey, you boys have never seen my face, have you?" Kakashi asks, apropos of nothing. Sakura keeps her eyes on her sandaled feet.

Naruto groans. "Ugh, *no.* We've tried so many times! But you always get away!" Then he gasps. "Are you finally gonna show us, since you're our sensei?!"

"No, but there's a guy right over there who looks exactly like me," he drawls, pointing vaguely to a spot far in front of them. Simultaneously, he uses the hand draped over Sakura's shoulder to grip her chin and tilt her face towards his own.

"Huh?!" Both boys make a mad scramble to look in the direction of his indication, completely unaware of what's happening behind them.

Sakura blinks, mouth dropping open in shock.

Kakashi's face.

Kakashi's face, completely exposed save the eye covered by his hitai-ate, stares back at her.

He flashes her a rather devilish grin, pointed canines peeking out, before he tugs his mask back up.

Sakura just continues to gape. Kakashi's face. She saw Kakashi's *face.*

And he's *cute.*

Cheeks aflame, Sakura quickly looks away. To her horror, the creature in her chest perks up with an entirely new type of interest, but she visualizes smacking it on the nose with a rolled up newspaper and it sulkily settles. Silently, she vows to deal with these new feelings later. *Alone.*

For now, she can be grateful for what it was—a gift of reassurance. That was definitely Kakashi's weird way of saying *hey, I'm not gonna forget you. You're important to me.*

She leans into him. *Message received.*

"Ugh, Kaka-aniki, you're such a liar," Naruto complains, flopping back down onto the jounin's legs. "Can we do the dumb icebreaker now or whatever?"

"Sure, Naruto," Kakashi responds dryly, and Sakura smothers a smile.

"Let's start with some basics. Tell me your likes, dislikes, something you're good at, something you could improve upon, and your dream for the future."

Sakura balks. *Basics?* That's so much information! And she's not sure she has an answer for a single category.

"Boooring," Naruto whines, but the grin in his voice betrays the fact that he's pleased he gets to talk about himself. "I'll go first!"

Internally, Sakura is deeply grateful for his ego.

"My name is Namikaze Naruto! I like ramen and my mom and dad! And Sasuke I guess," he amends. "I don't like bullies. Ummm, I'm good at Shadow Clone technique and pranks! I'm not super good at math or other writey stuff!"

Then Naruto pounds his chest and aims his most winsome smile at Sakura. "And my dream is to be Hokage, duh!"

Sakura returns the grin with several orders of magnitude less of wattage, but no less sincerity.

"You next, Sasuke," Kakashi says.

"My name is Uchiha Sasuke. I like training," Sasuke starts, voice hesitant. "And spending time with my big brother. I dislike sweets. I am proficient at fire-based techniques but my strategy could probably use some work."

He thinks for a few seconds. “My dream…my dream is to surpass my brother, and to protect my family.”

Kakashi nods. “A good goal,” he acknowledges, much to Naruto’s whining chagrin.

Sakura’s heart races. She’s next. *Fuck.* What is she supposed to say? There’s nothing she can come up with that won’t convince Sasuke and Naruto she’s a complete freakshow.

Thankfully, Kakashi rescues her by saying, “I’ll go next.”

Sakura briefly leans into his side, grateful again.

“My name is Hatake Kakashi,” he drawls. “I like reading and dogs. I don’t like people who are unkind to my comrades. I’m good at most things, but sometimes I don’t think before I speak, and people get hurt. My dream is to make sure the people precious to me stay safe.”

Sakura twitches, startled. She looks up at him, but Kakashi is eye-smiling at the boys, who look more confused than anything.

“You’re so weird sometimes, Kakashi-aniki,” Naruto shakes his head. “Okay now you, Sakura-chan!”

Sakura freezes. “Um, my name is…” *Roach, Pinky, Headsplitter, Brat.*

“Sakura,” she finishes lamely.

Kakashi gives her a quick squeeze, grounding her. Naruto and Sasuke appear to be waiting with uncharacteristic patience.

“I like solving problems. I dislike…” Sakura trails off, and she fiddles with the earring dangling from her lobe. “I dislike people who feel entitled to things.”

Halfway done, Sakura internally pats herself on the back. Just a few more answers.

“I’m pretty okay at—” Sakura’s mouth is suddenly dry and she swallows thickly. *Killing? Electrocution? Terrorism?*

Kakashi squeezes her again, and eventually: “Writing seals.”

The last one is almost the hardest, because what *isn’t* Sakura bad at? She could probably fill a dozen scrolls with this particular list. But ultimately, she mutters, “I’m bad at asking for help.”

There’s a beat of expectant silence, and Sakura blinks. “That’s it, right?” she asks a little confusedly.

But Naruto is shaking his head. “You forgot the last one, Sakura-chan! What’s your dream?”

Dream?

The word gives Sakura pause. It's so nebulous—and it's synonymous with fantasy, is it not? She could dream about anything for eternity—sprouting wings and flying, eating her way through an anmitsu bowl the size of a swimming pool, and so forth—and never come any closer to accomplishing it.

What good are dreams?

"Dream," she mutters, testing it out on her tongue.

"Yeah, yeah!" Naruto responds, interpreting her mumbling as a question. "Like, what do you want?"

Sakura considers this. *Want* and *dream* are very different things, in her opinion. On the frontlines, Sakura might've dreamed about going home, had she allowed herself to. Things that she *wanted* were a decent night's sleep or for Kakashi to return from a solo mission unhurt. Roach just wanted to survive.

And ten days ago, she wanted to die.

But what does she want now?

Sakura looks around at her teammates. She takes in Naruto's kind, honest face and Sasuke's earnest attention. Kakashi is a warm, rock-solid support against her side, grounding her.

"I want…I want to figure out *what* I want. I...don't want to just *not die* anymore," she says, gaining a little confidence with each word.

Then Sakura smiles, feeling something warm bloom in her chest. "I want to live."

-fin-

End Notes

I hope you enjoyed! Comments make my day. Which part was your favorite? What horrified you the most? I want to know!!!

I will likely make this into part of a series of oneshots (though follow-ups will be significantly shorter) because there are a few more scenes I'd like to write from this sandbox :)

CONTENT WARNINGS (CONTAINS SPOILERS):
Attempted sexual coercion of a minor (a superior officer attempts to coerce Sakura into being intimate with him but she escapes)
Referenced sexual assault (a serial rapist is discussed)
Drowning (graphic scene of Sakura nearly drowning in a water reservoir)
Referenced animal death (an unnamed dog's nonviolent, offscreen death is referenced)
Body modification (Sakura uses seals on her skin to store weapons and implants the canines of the dead dog in her own mouth, she also frequently sheds large portions of her skin)
Emetophobia (vomiting is referenced a few times)
Fairly extreme, graphic violence (a general warning. this is violent!)
Electrocution and burning
Loss of identity/dissociation (Sakura frequently dissociates and it gets to the extent that she assumes a different persona with a different name when engaging in certain things)
I think that's the worst of it? If there's a content warning you think I should add (within reason) let me know.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!